REAL WESTERN

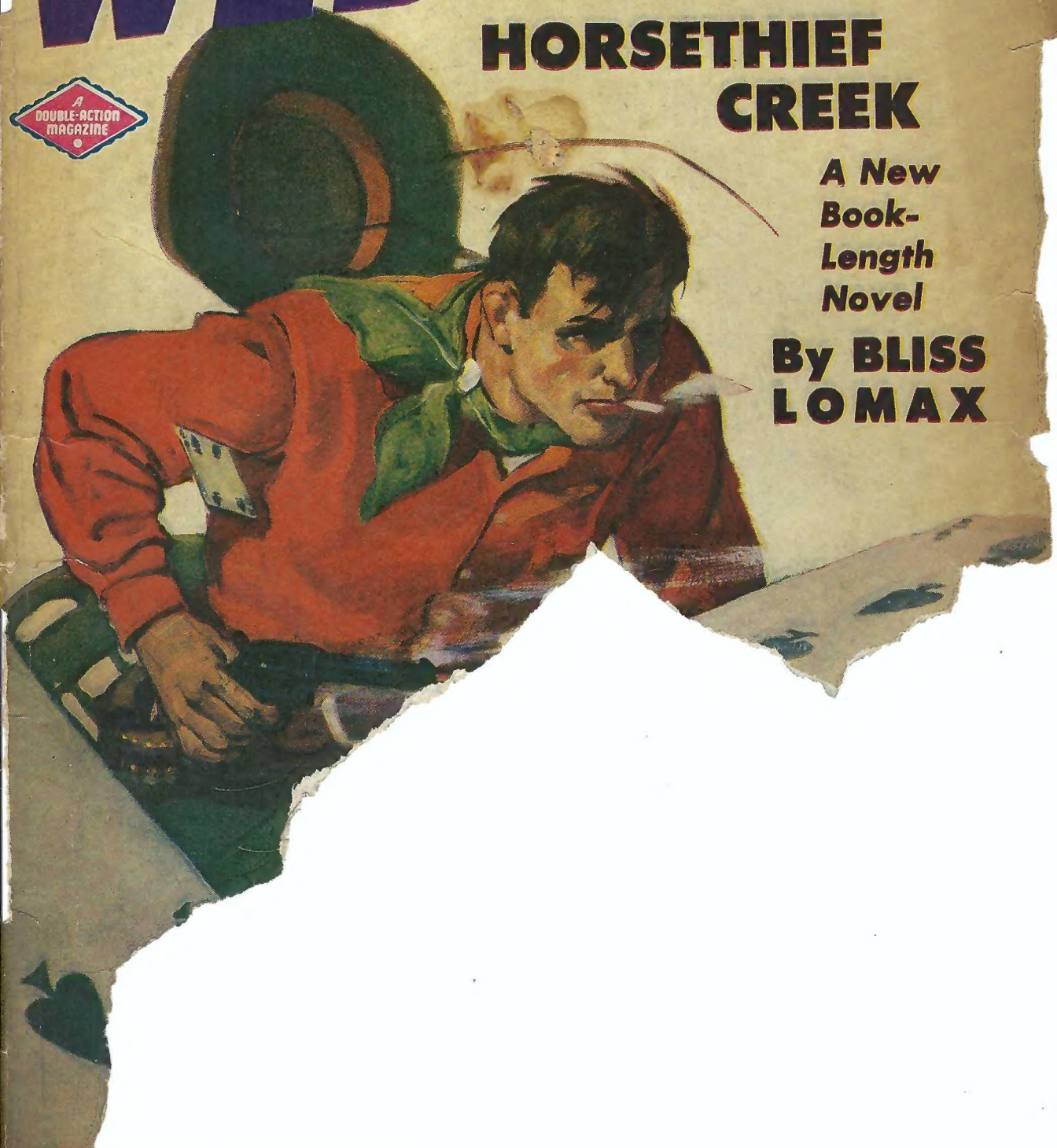
APRIL 15¢

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

HORSETHIEF CREEK

A New Book-Length Novel

By BLISS LOMAX



Learn Profitable Profession in 90 Days at Home

LARGE INCOMES FROM SWEDISH MASSAGE

Independence for Young and Older Men and Women

IF YOU are looking for a new and better way to make a living, and at the same time contribute to national health and happiness, learn Swedish Massage — a DIGNIFIED, FASCINATING, PROFITABLE PROFESSION, and one of the few still open to men and women without college training. Hundreds of our **home study graduates** either have fine positions or a private practice of their own. Many report minimum earnings of $50.00 to $75.00 per week. Some make more. H. C. Crittendon reports an average of $60.00 per day.

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The expert in Swedish Massage is recognized as a professional of the highest type, commanding the respect of everyone in his community. Here is a profession, now open to you, which makes you a public benefactor; for t[he] skill we teach you is of great aid in r[e]
human ailmen[ts]
well as in
beauty—it
positio[n]

Miss E. A. Childs, Md.

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Large Incomes from Doctors,

hospitals, sanitariums, clubs and private patients are bound to come to those of our graduates who profit by the thousands of opportunities available to make money. Mr. Charles Romer, Wisconsin, writes, "At times I have had to turn away people; I have been so busy the depression never touched me." Miss Childs, Baltimore, Maryland, says, "I already have over 40 patients. I hope many others take your course and profit financially and socially as I have." Hundreds and hundreds of graduates have written similar letters. Get into Swedish Massage through our "Right in Your Own Home" Study Plan.

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When you have completed our home study course (high school training not needed), you will be awarded THE College of Swedish Massage Diploma. This diploma is a badge of honor, a warranty to the public that you have qualified as an expert and should be accepted by them as proof of your proficiency in your chosen profession. Enroll now, before it becomes necessary to spend years of intense training to qualify for a permit to practice.

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YES- RADIO MEN ARE MAKING GOOD MONEY NOW AND HAVE A BRIGHT FUTURE. I'M GOING TO START LEARNING RADIO RIGHT NOW!
NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.

BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THE N.R.I. COURSE IS PRACTICAL. I'M MAKING $5 TO $10 A WEEK FIXING RADIOS IN SPARE TIME WHILE LEARNING
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'M A FULL TIME RADIO TECHNICIAN NOW. N.R.I. HELPS A FELLOW JUMP HIS PAY
THANKS
BILL, I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE WON SUCCESS SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'M MAKING GOOD MONEY THANKS TO N.R.I. AND WE HAVE A BRIGHT FUTURE
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN--*More Now Make $50 a Week Than Ever Before*--I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
(Our 30th Year)

Here's your chance to get a good job in a busy wartime field with a bright peacetime future! There is a real shortage today of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. So mail the Coupon for a FREE copy of my 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating types of Radio jobs; tells how N.R.I. trains you at home in spare time; how you get practical experience by building real Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

Big Demand Now for Well-Trained Radio Technicians, Operators

Fixing Radios pays better now than for years. With new Radios out of production, fixing old sets which were formerly traded in, adds greatly to the normal number of servicing jobs.

Broadcasting stations, Aviation and Police Radio, and other Radio branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, now working on Government orders for Radio equipment, employ trained men. The Government too needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men.

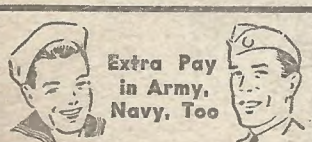
Many Beginners Soon Make $5, $10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time

The moment you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show how to earn EXTRA money fixing Radios. Many make $5, $10 a week EXTRA in spare time while learning. I send you SIX big kits of real Radio parts so you can get practical experience by building real Radio Circuits.

Good Pay Jobs Coming in Television, Electronics

Think of the NEW jobs that Television, Frequency Modulation, Electronics, and other Radio developments will open after the war! You have a real opportunity. I will train you to be ready to cash in when Victory releases these amazing wartime Radio developments for peacetime uses!

But the opportunity the war has given beginners to get started in the fascinating field of Radio may never be repeated. So take the first step at once. Get my FREE 64-page, illustrated book. No obligation—no salesman will call. Just mail Coupon in an envelope or paste it on a penny postcard.—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4CA2, National Radio Institute, Washington —9, D. C.



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Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps Service men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Over 1,700 Service men now enrolled.

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Mail me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book: "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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City ..... State .....

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REAL WESTERN

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

Volume 9 ★ ★ APRIL, 1944 ★ ★ Number 6

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

HORSETHIEF CREEK.....By Bliss Lomax 10

Behind the murder of a Chinese cook, the drygulching of a ranch owner, and the poisoning of cattle at the Rocking Chair, Rainbow and Grumpy unravelled a strange and sinister plot which had to be smashed!

SHORT STORY

POWDERSMOKE PAYOFF .....By Cliff Campbell 82

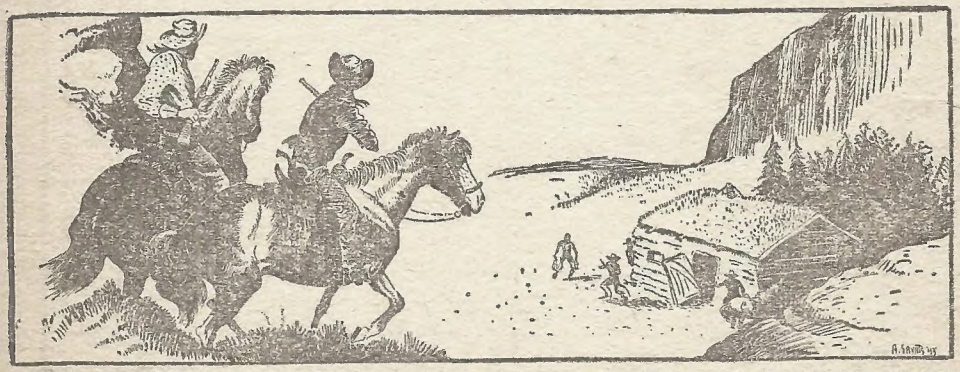
"Tonight the debt I owe to the men who murdered my son will be paid!"

DEPARTMENT

TRAIL AND SADDLE.....Fact Articles of the West 78

"Portrait of a Frontiersman" by Kenneth P. Wood.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor



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Which will YOU wear after the war?

HUNDREDS of thousands of white collar workers have put on war overalls for the duration. Millions of both white collar and overall workers have put on uniforms. Hosts of home women are patriotically taking jobs.

After the war, millions will be coming back from army, navy and air force to civilian jobs; great war materials factories will be re-converting to civilian production; old peace-time functions of business will be springing up—where will you fit in the situation?

If you are wise, you will look ahead and prepare. You will not wait on chance. You will analyze the probable conditions in peace employment, decide where your likes and aptitudes fit best, and get ready. You will decide whether your best opportunities lie in production or office or store. You will determine whether you wish to work for someone else or develop a business of your own. You will train now to be above the average and, therefore, surer to get the opportunity you want after the armistice.

Nor will you wait very long. Nobody knows when this war will end or how soon this problem will hit you in the face.

We Can Help You Decide

If you have some question either about postwar opportunities or about your own fitness for some particular one, probably we can help you. In our 34 years, over one million adults have enrolled for our training, we have built training courses for many major fields of commerce and industry, and we have gathered a wealth of information about job opportunities and requirements. That information is at your service.

We Can Help You Prepare

And when you have decided what field of work offers most to you for a life career, we can help you prepare for it—quickly, economically, thoroughly, in your spare time and without any interference with your present work—if it is in the list below. A 48-page booklet on the field of your choice, discussing the field and our training for it, has been prepared to help answer your questions. The coupon below or your letter will bring it to you, without cost or obligation.

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- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Stenotypy

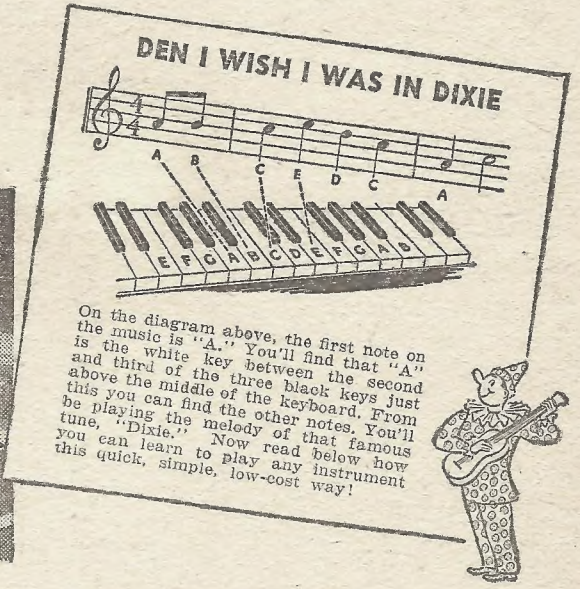
*Name*_____ *Age*_____

*Present Job*_____

*Address*_____

LOOKS EASY... ...AND IT IS EASY!

—yet, it's from that famous favorite of the South, "Dixie"



On the diagram above, the first note on the music is "A." You'll find that "A" is the white key between the second and third of the three black keys just above the middle of the keyboard. From this you can find the other notes. You'll be playing the melody of that famous tune, "Dixie." Now read below how you can learn to play any instrument this quick, simple, low-cost way!

THINK OF IT! Music Lessons For Less Than 7c a day and you learn right at home, this easy short-cut way

IF you are anxious to learn music but hesitate because you think it is too difficult, just follow the simple instructions in the panel above. You'll be surprised to discover that it is easy as A-B-C to learn to play, right at home, without a private teacher, by this remarkable short-cut method.

Yes, thousands of folks have found the U. S. School of Music method makes learning a pleasant pastime instead of a bore. No long hours of practicing tedious scales and exercises. No trick charts or number systems. With this method you learn to play by playing real tunes from real notes.

And everything is made so clear you just can't go wrong. First you read the simple printed instructions. Then you see how to play from clear pictures and diagrams. Then you play yourself and hear how it sounds. You start in with simple melodies . . . and gradually go on to more advanced ones. And sooner than you ever dared hope you're playing most any popular tune.

Remember, you need no special talent to learn this up-to-date way. And no matter which instrument you choose, the cost averages less than 7c a day. That covers everything . . . printed lessons, sheet music and our Personal Advisory Service . . . no extras of any kind!

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PLAYS FROM THE START. Your advertisements are true to the letter. I can actually play my favorite instrument even though I'm only at the beginning. How can I ever express my joyful gratitude. *F. R. O., Illinois.

INVITED TO PARTIES. Before I took your course, I did not know one note of music. Then 3 months later I started to play for dances. I've been invited to many parties. *R. M., Vancouver, B. C.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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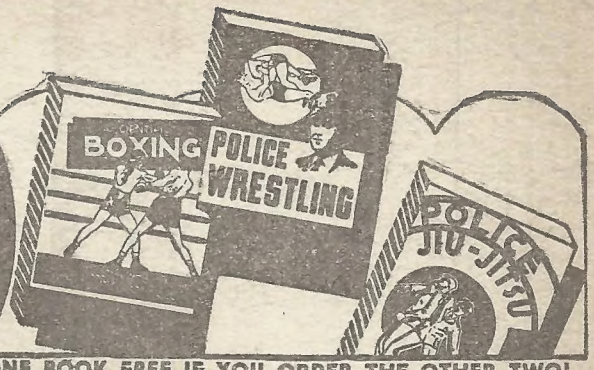

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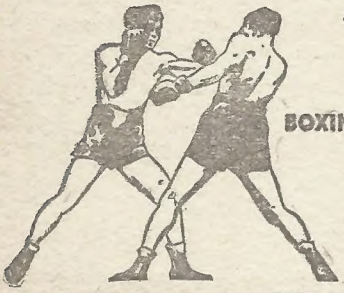

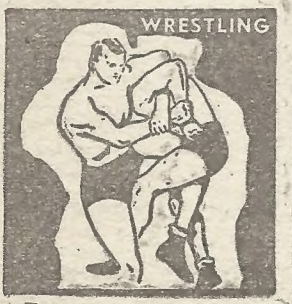

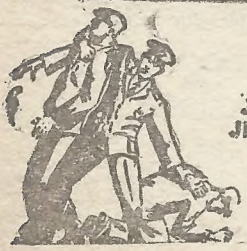

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Now—do you know how strong just horsepower is? If you could lift 550 pou just one foot in one second, you'd be exer one horsepower. Only very few men have veloped such prodigious strength. Arthur Sa —probably the strongest man who ever live lifted 482 pounds over his head from the fl Louis Cyr, the famed Canadian wonder lifted 559 pounds, a few inches off the fl with one hand, and became famous.

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These remarkable instructions, based on Hoffman's years of successful experience, t you up from scratch—through nutrition rest and breathing, through the thorough de opment of all your muscles to as near perf tion as you can reach. Then you will h power beyond your wildest dreams. Your wh body will have acquired enviable form. will have added inches to your chest, h wind and stamina, powerful lungs, a stron heart. You will glow with health and spar with vitality and virility. Your mind will quick and alert. Your movements will faster, surer. You will have tremendous c fidence in your ability to do things—AN you will win the admiration of all.

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- ☐ THE BIG CHEST BOOK $1.98
- ☐ THE BIG ARM BOOK $1.9
- ☐ Enclosed find $..... in full payment.
- ☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman $..... plus postage

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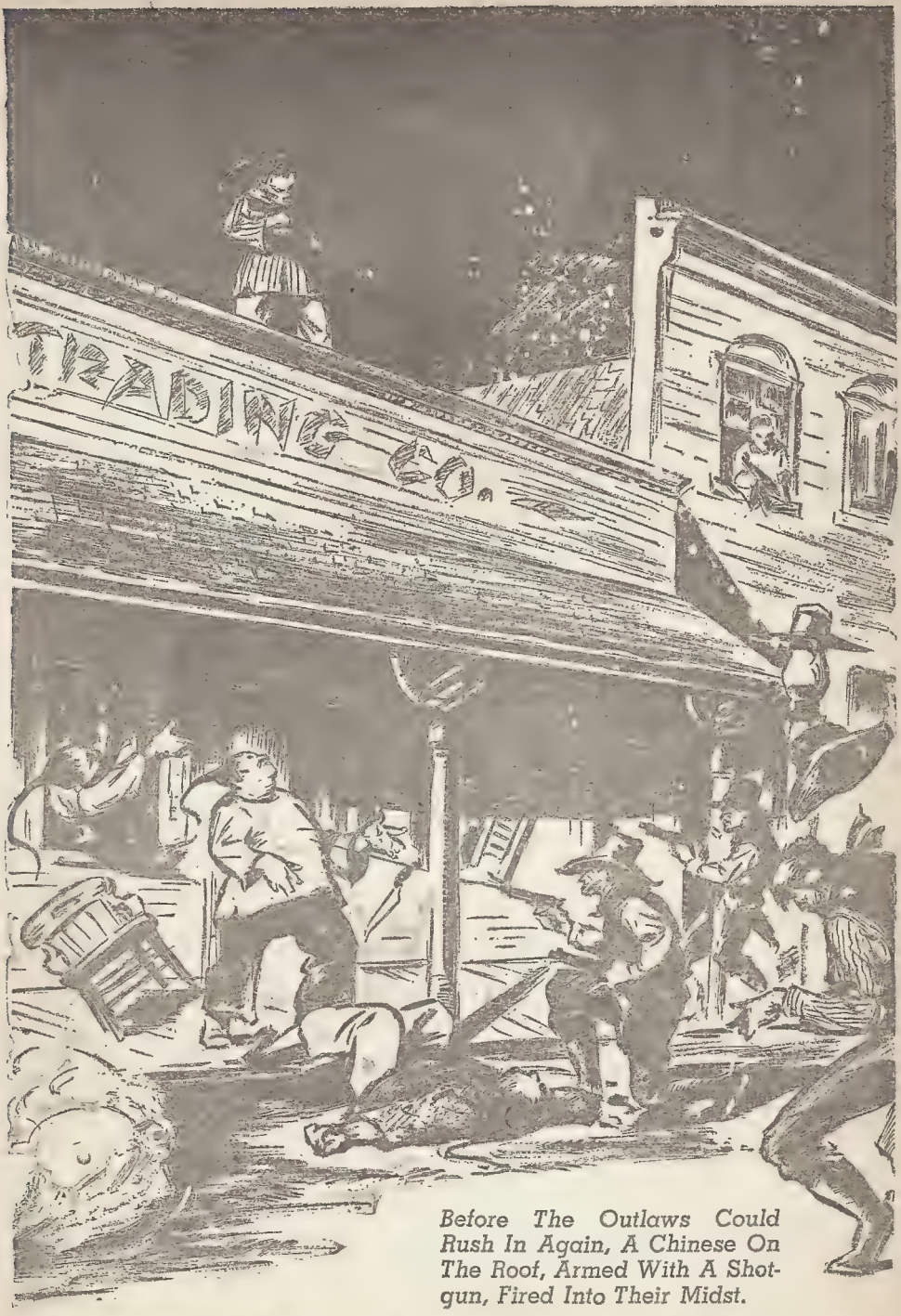

Before The Outlaws Could Rush In Again, A Chinese On The Roof, Armed With A Shotgun, Fired Into Their Midst.

HORSETHIEF CREEK

Featuring Rainbow and Grumpy

CHAPTER I

Trailing Trouble

THE jury was out only a few minutes. The five defendants shifted about uneasily in their chairs and exchanged a grim, hopeless glance as the twelve men filed back into the box.

"Have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

The lanky foreman nodded and got to his feet. "We have, your honor. We find the defendants guilty as charged."

Their decision was not unexpected. Judge Rossman thanked them and glared the packed courtroom to silence.

"The evidence was such that you couldn't have brought in any other verdict," he told the jurors. "In finding these men guilty, you've only done your duty. That one of them has been a hitherto respected rancher in this county did not make your job any easier. The court would also like to thank Sheriff Hines and Mr. Edmonds, the prosecutor, for the manner in which the case was presented. Special thanks must go to the two detectives, the Messrs. Ripley and Gibbs, who were brought in by the Stockmen's Association to assist the sheriff. The courage and shrewdness they exhibited in establishing the guilt of these men need no comment from me."

The crowded courtroom broke into noisy applause.

Down in the front row of seats that redoubtable little man, Grumpy Gibbs, scowled at his tall partner.

"Why in tarnation don't he git this over with and let us git outa here?" he protested irrascibly. "It's colder than a Methodist church in January in this courtroom, Rip!"

The ghost of an amused smile touched Rainbow Ripley's tight-lipped mouth. They had looked so much trouble in the eye together and had come to depend on each other so completely that there was almost perfect understanding between them. As a consequence, Rainbow felt reasonably certain that it was Grumpy's aversion to being caught in the limelight that was behind his complaint.

"Don't try to pull my leg that way," he said, with a straight face. "Don't pretend to me that this little round of applause is annoying you. Aren't you always claiming you're never appreciated? This is your chance. Why don't you stand up and take a bow?"

It was a triple mystery: the murder of a harmless Chinese cook; the drygulching of a well-liked ranch owner, and the wholesale poisoning of the cattle at the Rocking Chair. And Rainbow and Grump, ace range detectives, were certain that these three crimes fitted into a single sinister pattern!

The little one bristled.

"Good Josephine, will you stop that nonsense?" he growled. "I ain't lookin' for no bokays! I tell you, I don't only want to git outa this courthouse, I want to git out of Montana! I'm sick of this snow and cold weather we been buckin' for four, five months. I want to see green grass ag'in, and let the sun have a chance to git the chill outa my bones!" He shook his head to himself, and added in a milder tone, "I ain't gittin' ready for crutches—I can still hold up my end—but I ain't gittin' no younger, and that's a fact."

It was a startling admission, coming from him. It sobered Rainbow abruptly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was just having a little sport with you. I'm as fed up with this country as you are. I promise you we'll be heading out of Bear Paw this afternoon if the trains are still running."

JUDGE ROSSMAN had started banging his gavel. He called the prisoners to the bar and asked them if they had anything to say before he passed sentence. Their lawyer answered for them and said no. The

crowd had stiffened expectantly, knowing what was coming, for Rossman had a reputation for his bitter, excoriating harangues before he "threw the book" at a condemned man that was state-wide. Glaring down from the bench, he launched into a violent tirade.

Rainbow sat there without listening, a preoccupied look on his lean, bronzed face, still mulling over what Grump had said. Never before in all the years they had been together had the latter ever asked for any quarter for himself. Even when he had been badly shot up, down on the Rio Colorado, two years back, he had scoffed at the suggestion that he'd have to take things easy for a while. A few weeks later he had insisted he was as good as ever. That he went so far now as to speak of holding up his end and admitting his advancing years told Ripley which way the wind was blowing. His unreadable gray eyes narrowed as the realization was forced on him that they could not go on forever. The thought frightened him, and he wouldn't have it that way.

"It's my fault," he brooded angrily. "He's always so full of pepper that I keep forgetting he's old enough to be my father. Thirty and thirty-five below zero for days at a time! I must have been crazy to put him up against that. He'll be good for another ten years, at least, if I'll just have sense enough to remember that we can get all the work we can handle without going after anything like this again."

Starting from scratch, they had made money and established themselves as the most successful range detectives in the Rocky Mountain states. Judged by some of their better-known cases, this Bear Paw matter was a minor incident in their careers. It had gone their way and paid well, but the weather they had faced had taken something out of both of them. It was a closed account now, and Rainbow was anxious to dismiss it from his mind. There was another matter, however, that called for a decision, and in his present mood, he did not hesitate to make it.

Within the week he had received a letter from Inspector Dan Ross, of the U. S. Immigration Service, asking them to meet him in Butte. By the tone of the letter, it sounded like another case, with the prospect of work along the Canadian border. Rip had expressed his interest. The prospect of undertaking an assignment for the Immigration Service still appealed to him personally. But he would have none of it now.

"I don't have to tell Grump why I've changed my mind about it," he argued with himself. "I can rig up an excuse in Butte."

The judge had finally finished his scathing indictment of the convicted men. He ordered them confined in the state penitentiary for a period of ten years. A few minutes later, the spectators started moving toward the doors. Rainbow and Grumpy went along with them. Outside on the steps they found Ivy Hines, the sheriff, waiting to say good-bye to them.

"I hate to see you pull away," he said. "I suppose you're lighting out for Wyoming and the Bar 7, at Black Forks."

"It's pretty hard to plan ahead in this business," Rip answered, consciously evasive. "That Green River country is a pleasant place to be this time of the year. If we have any time to lazy away, that's where you'll find us. A letter in care of Judge Carver will always reach us there."

Grumpy had already disposed of their horses, and their guns and riding gear were sacked and waiting to be checked at the railroad station. When the afternoon train pulled out for Butte, they were aboard.

The air in the smoker was foul with stale tobacco smoke. But the steam pipes were pounding, and Grump puffed his pipe and appeared content. Bear Paw was far behind them, when he said without warning: "You wasn't pinin' yoreself down none when you was sayin' good-bye to Hines, was you?"

RAINBOW glanced at him over the top of the newspaper he had been reading. "What makes you say that?" he inquired innocently.

"Huh!" the little man snorted. "Don't I know you? You ain't got yore sights trained on Wyomin'. Butte's as far as we're goin'."

Rip gave him a poker-faced grin. "You sound pretty sure about that. We'll see Inspector Ross for a few minutes tomorrow morning and find out what's on his mind. Maybe it's a favor he wants—a bit of information he thinks we can supply. We owe him that courtesy. I don't expect anything to come of it."

"Good Josephine!" Grumpy exclaimed disgustedly.

"Is that why you checked our stuff through only as far as Butte?"

Rainbow laughed ruefully at finding himself trapped. It was what he wanted the little one to believe. The enthusiasm he had expressed on receiving Ross's letter warned him that any abrupt about-face now would only arouse his partner's suspicions. To pretend to be interested until something came up in their conversation with the inspector, to which he could make objection, promised a better way out.

They found Ross in the postoffice building, in the morning. Almost with his first word he gave them to understand that he wanted to engage them for special duty in connection with his department's drive to curb the wholesale smuggling into the country of alien Chinese.

"We're making arrests all the time and deporting hundreds of those yellow boys," he continued. "But we know a lot of 'em are slipping through our fingers." He pointed to the map on the wall. "Look at that stretch of country along the border from North Dakota to the Coast. Better than a thousand miles to watch! If I had ten times the force I've got I couldn't plug all the holes."

"I thought you had that game pretty well broken up," Rainbow remarked.

"Don't you believe it, Rip! It's a big business today. Why, the yellow slavers who operate this ring must be piling up a fortune! They've got dozens of agents. Just about the time we get them spotted, they are shifted to some other part of the country and new ones take their place."

"White men mixed up in this?" Grumpy inquired, trying to appear interested, though even the thought of another season along the border made him wince.

"Plenty of 'em, Grump. And they're a dangerous lot, I warn you. They're playing for big stakes; they know if we pick them up it means twenty years in Alcatraz. We usually find that they've been running narcotics before they got into this game. Some of them are still at it. I know you boys have tangled with a lot of desperate men in your time. These fellows are a different breed of rats. I don't care how bad a cowboy gets, there's usually a streak of something approaching decency left in him. That's not true of these birds; they're vermin, and you never want to forget it."

"We don't scare easy," the little man observed. Rip was satisfied to let him do the talking for them. "Where would we fit into this, Inspector?"

"It was my idea that the two of you, working on your own, might be able to find out where these Chinese go who slip by our border patrol. Once one of them, after entering the U. S. unlawfully, reaches San Francisco or New York, or any city with a big Chinatown, we can kiss him good-bye. We know these boys are herded through these western states, held a few weeks, and then shipped east or west. If we're going to have any chance of grabbing them, we've got to know how this underground works. Maybe there's a dozen separate channels." Ross settled back in his chair. "You can appreciate how important this information is to us. I'll sign you up for a year and make the price as high as I can."

"We can think it over," Rip said casually, though now that he knew what the proposition was it appealed to him more than ever. "I always thought that when a Chinese was smuggled into the country he had to lay the money on the line first, and that he was on his own as soon as he got across."

"NO MORE, Rip. These fellows are mostly Cantonese coolies. I suspect some of them don't even have their steerage money. These yellow slavers can make any terms they want with them; they'll bring them in and ship 'em around and see that they get to work. Sometimes these boys will be ten years paying off. If one of them starts to squawk, they rub him out, and it's just another unexplained Chinatown murder."

Ross mentioned the figure he was willing to pay. Rainbow was relieved to find it less than he expected. He flicked a glance at Grumpy to see how he was taking it. To his surprise, the little man said, "We can do better than that, but money ain't the only consideration with us. Where'd we make our headquarters?"

Figuratively speaking, it put Ripley back on his heels. He had expected to use the low pay as an argument for turning down the proposition and have Grumpy's support, for the doughty little man had a keen eye for a dollar. To have him not only toss that aside as irrelevant, but to intimate that he liked the idea, was more than the tall man could understand.

"Bear Paw would do," said Ross "I've always been suspicious of that wild stretch of country east and west of there. You could watch those lonely mountain passes and work all that uninhabited country around the peaks."

Rip thought that would stop the little one, but the latter only nodded woodenly. "Sounds all right," he muttered. Without looking up, he added: "What do you think about it, Rip?"

Rainbow began to get it, finally. He told himself there was only one explanation. "He's pretending to like the idea because he thinks my heart is set on it, when he knows it means another killing winter for him."

Rainbow was about to turn it down flatly, without even attempting any subterfuge, when an inspiration came to him.

"I don't like it," he said. "I wouldn't mind the poor money if it meant helping the government. But that's not the size of it, Dan; we wouldn't be going out to get the big shots in this racket. The best we could hope for would be to run down a few scared Chinks and their guards. That's not our dish. It's straight police work. Across the line in Canada it would be a job for the Mounted." He shook his head with seeming regret. "I'm sorry, but if we took on a job like that it wouldn't help our reputations any. We're detectives, and we've got to have something we can get our teeth in."

"That's ridiculous!" Ross protested. "If I didn't know it was more important than that I wouldn't be offering it to you."

Rip admitted to himself that it wasn't the best excuse in the world, but he was more interested in what Grumpy thought about it than in the inspector's reaction. The little man was wagging his head thoughtfully. He didn't want any part of this proposition. Anything he had said to the contrary had been voiced for the very reason that Rainbow surmised. Now that a way out was dangling before his eyes, he was careful not to appear over-anxious to grasp it. With his rocky face screwed up into a desert man's squint, he turned to him.

"There may be somethin' to what yo're sayin', Rip," he declared soberly. "I hadn't thought of that; we're either detectives or we ain't nothin'. It would be tyin' ourselves up for a long spell."

IT TOLD Rainbow just what he wanted to know. "It sure would," he agreed, "and once we signed up, there'd be nothing to do but go through with it. . . No, Dan, I'm afraid we better pass it up."

It took them half an hour to convince the inspector that they meant it.

"I'm glad you got that flash on this business before it was too late," Grumpy observed, as he and Rip went down the street in search of a restaurant. "I was all set to go through with it."

Rainbow nodded soberly. "I saw that you were. We didn't make any

mistake in turning it down. We've been at this game too long to start playing small boy for the Immigration Service. Something else will turn up. The Oregon Short Line's got a fast train south to Salt Lake at one o'clock. If we can get space on it, we better ride it as far as Pocatello; we can get over to Granger tomorrow on the local. We'll see about it when we've polished off some ham and eggs."

Grumpy began to perk up surprisingly.

"This place looks first-class," he declared, glancing into the restaurant they were passing. "Let's give it a whirl."

It wasn't often that they breakfasted as late as ten o'clock. The little man spread himself and startled the waiter by calling for a double order of ham and eggs and a pot of coffee.

"Bring in the coffee right now," he ordered, "and see that there's plenty of it."

The food was good. That, and the knowledge that they were bound for Wyoming, seemed to lift a load from Grumpy's shoulders. The deception he believed he had practiced on Rainbow did not weigh on his conscience in the slightest. The latter smiled inscrutably and had no regrets. As he expected, they did not have any difficulty getting space on the noon train.

"You better send the Judge a wire and let him know we're leavin' Butte," Grumpy suggested. "It'll give him an idea of when to have someone in Black Forks with a rig. When you git that attended to we'll have time to buy a little somethin' for Howie and the boys at the ranch."

They left the snow behind them during the night. When they awoke in the morning, the sun was shining warmly and the sagebrush was green out on the flatlands. At Idaho Falls, the conductor came into the Pullman with a telegram for Rainbow.

"Must be from the Judge," Grumpy said promptly. "He's the only one knows we're on this train. What's it say?"

Ripley glanced at the brief wire.

"It's from the Judge, all right," he volunteered. "Here's what he says: 'Forwarding wires and mail care station agent Pocatello. Stop. Thought it was important. Regards, Carver.'"

The little one's hard-bitten face was suddenly all lines. "Flagged at the last minute!" he growled. "Reckon it means we won't see the ranch after all!"

"Just keep your rompers on," Rip advised. "We'll be in Pocatello in a few hours and we'll see what this is all about. If it's just a good baking out in the sun that's worrying you, I can think of a lot of places where it's hotter than it ever will be on the Bar 7. Of course, if it's a case of your wanting to sit back and live on your income, that's something else. I suppose I could take a case by myself."

"Hunh!" the little man snapped scornfully. "You wouldn't git far! The first good-lookin' woman that came along would have you dancin' at the end of her string before you could say Jack Robinson! Don't let my plans bother you; you doggone well know that if this turns out to be our sort of a case that I ain't tossin' it over my shoulder."

RIP grinned. "That sounds more like you. When you get sassy, I know everything is all right."

They were acquainted with Tom Coates, the Short Line agent at Pocatello. He waved a fat letter at them as they stepped into his office.

"I figured you'd be along," he said, shaking hands. "This just came in this morning, Rip. I noticed it was from the Judge. Just spread out here and make yourselves comfortable; I'll be back in a few minutes."

Rainbow glanced at the telegrams enclosed in the envelope and realized that they referred to the letter. There was also a note from Judge Carver. "I have wired this party that I was trying to get in touch with you," he wrote, "and that she would be hearing from you. That was two days ago. I wish to heaven you would keep me informed as to where I can reach you. Something really important might turn up sometime. Regards, B. C." There was a postscript: "I

asked Carter, at the bank, to find out what he could about these people. He told me this morning that this T. R. Gordon ran a big outfit and had been president of the Humboldt Valley Stock-raisers Association two or three times. I thought you would like to know."

Rip handed the note to Grumpy. The little one put on his gold-rimmed spectacles and read it with interest. "Wal?" he queried. "Goin' to take you all day to git through that letter? Is this another rustlin' job?"

"No, a couple killings, and no arrests to date. Sounds like it's right up our alley. It means Nevada again. How does that strike you? You've always seemed to like that country."

"I do," the little one agreed. "What part of the state?"

"Nevada City—cow country above the Humboldt. Let me read this thing to you. It's from a Miss Glenna Gordon. She says she has seen our names mentioned in the Western Stockman's Journal from time to time and that she would like to have us take charge of this matter for her. This wire here says the Nevada City National will honor our draft for five hundred dollars to cover transportation and so forth. That sounds like she means business."

"Wal, read the letter if yo're goin' to!" Grumpy growled at him.

"Just a minute," Rainbow returned "I'm trying to get down to the facts. Listen to this: 'On the 7th of March. our Chinese cook was found murdered just below the ranch yard. Though the weapon has never been located it was obvious that an ax or hatchet had been used. The man had been with us a long time, and though, as far as we know, he had no enemies among his own people, our sheriff, Mr. Marsh Burling, has insisted from the first that the killing was the result of some mysterious tong vengeance. We have a Chinese colony in Nevada City numbering several hundred. Mr. Burling questioned a number of them in the course of his investigation. Nothing came of it, and I gather from his attitude that he regards any further effort to track down Cheng's killer as hopeless, and he seems willing to put it down as an unsolved crime, and forget it.'"

"Chinks ag'in," the little man grumbled. "Don't seem to be able to git away from 'em."

Rip frowned at him for the interruption. "Do you want me to continue?" he demanded.

"Go ahead!" Grumpy flared back crustily. "I was jest expressin' an opinion; this is still a free country. Mixin' up in a tong war shore ought to be right up our alley," he added sarcastically.

"This is no tong killing. You'll agree on that by the time I finish. Let me go on. 'Several weeks after Cheng's death, one of the neighbors, a Mr. Buck Mullhall, tried to induce my father to sell him this ranch. Rocking Chair has never been offered for sale. I mention this only because we were surprised to learn that Mr. Mullhall was prosperous enough to think of acquiring this property. His own ranch is hardly on a paying basis, but most of his time is devoted to the saloon he operates in Nevada City. I had forgotten the incident, when, on the night of April 3rd, as he was driving home from town, my father was shot and killed. He had the ranch payroll with him, and it was taken. Robbery could have been the motive, which is what Sheriff Burling claims. He has found no clues, and it is apparently as big a mystery as Cheng's killing.'" Rainbow paused. "Are you beginning to get the drift of all this?"

"I shore am!" was the little one's emphatic answer. "I don't like the way that badge-toter fits into it. He's either solid bone from the neck up or dealin' from the bottom. . . Is that all she has to say?"

RIP shook his head and continued: "'We put our cows on spring range on the first of the month. About ten days ago they began to sicken. We have already lost about twenty head; violent convulsions for a few minutes, and then death. We have an experienced, loyal crew on Rocking Chair, and an able foreman. They don't know what to

make of it. I have had a vet out several times, but it is as big a mystery to him as it is to us.'" Rainbow checked himself and gave his partner a shrewd, sober glance. "This last paragraph is important. See what you make of it. 'Nothing can shake my belief that these events are related. How, or why, I cannot say. I have expressed my conviction to Mr. Pennoyer, our district attorney, to my lawyer and to Sheriff Burling. They ridicule the idea. The only effect it has had on me has been to make me more certain than ever that my father was not murdered for the money he carried, and that Cheng was not killed to satisfy the vengeance of any secret Chinese organization. I know it is something in connection with this ranch that is at the bottom of it, and I can only wonder if I shall be the next one to meet a violent death.'"

Rip shoved the letter across the desk. His gray eyes were cold and sober. "What do you think?" he asked.

"That she's got it sized up right," was Grumpy's flinty answer. "You know the pattern of these things as well as I do; it sticks out all over this set-up."

Rainbow nodded. "Glenna," he murmured more to himself than to Grumpy. "I suppose that's Scotch." He tried the name again. "Glenna Gordon—I like the sound of it."

"*Jee*rusalem!" the little man exploded. "Is that all this means to you? Of course, it's Scotch! I suppose she's got blue eyes and yellow hair. But there's a price on that gal's life, and you know it! There's somethin' on that ranch somebody wants, and they're goin' to have that outfit, or know why. You can see how they been handin' out the discouragement to her. Knockin' off that cook was the first step. Killin' her father was the next move. If she don't take the hint—"

"I'm not so sure that's the right angle," Rainbow declared thoughtfully. "Gordon and his cook might have stumbled on to something that certain parties felt it wasn't safe for them to know. It could have been a lot of things. But they string together; I'll go that far with you. . . Hand me one of those telegraph blanks." He addressed the message. "What'll I tell her?"

"Tell her?" Grumpy rapped impatiently. "Good Josephine, tell her we're comin'! We can be in Ogden this evenin'. That'll put us in Nevada City tomorrow afternoon. It's my hunch that we won't be gittin' there none too soon."

Rip gave him a long shrewd glance. "O k a y," he murmured. "Your hunches have always been good enough for me. You run out to the baggage room and grab our stuff; I'll get this wire off."

CHAPTER II

A Warning and A Promise

FROM the platform of the railroad station, Nevada City lay spread out before them. It was older than most of the cow-towns they had known, but the difference was so slight that they were hardly aware of it. The courthouse, the unpaved main street, already deep in dust, the store buildings with their wooden awnings, the brick bank building on the corner, fell into familiar place in their eyes.

There was no one at the station to meet them, Ripley having said in his telegram that they would arrive on the late afternoon train. Connections in Ogden had worked in their favor and put them at their destination several hours ahead of schedule. The partners did not mind waiting. In fact, they preferred to arrive on their own and have a chance to size up a town before their business there was known.

"Nothin' startlin' about this place," Grumpy observed. "We've seen the likes of it a hundred times."

Rainbow nodded. "We've got some time to kill. Suppose we get at it."

"We goin' to look up the sheriff?" the little one inquired.

"No, we'll let him look us up. If I read things correctly, we're not going to get any help from the law this trip. We can use a shave; we'll

drop into a barbershop and see what the talk is; we can drift into the saloons then. This is one place where we ought to be unknown. Maybe we can get a line on things before anyone begins to wonder what we're doing in town."

Grumpy's puckered eyes were focused sharply on a swarthy-faced man leaning against one of the uprights that supported the awning of a saloon across the way. By the cut of his clothes and their quality, he was hardly a rangeman. His attention strayed in the partners' direction, as he manicured his finger nails with a small pearl-handled penknife. Though the regard with which he favored them was seemingly bored and uncurious, his eyes were alive with unpleasant speculation, for he had recognized them the moment they stepped down from the train.

Memory finally clicked in Grumpy's brain.

"Unknown, eh?" he growled. "I'll change yore mind about that in a hurry! There's a saloon across the way; the sign on it says it's the Lucky Boy. There's a lean, hawk-faced gent holdin' up one of the awnin' posts. Take a squint at him."

Rip managed an unhurried glance at the man.

"Humph!" he murmured. "Looks familiar. I don't place him right off."

"He was answering to the name of Speed Daggett the last time he crossed our trail. He used to deal a lot of poker. When we started to close in on the gents who hoisted that bank in Medicine Bow, he left town awful sudden."

"You may be right," Rip murmured. "Certainly a marked resemblance. But that was three, four years ago, Grump. That's a long time to remember a face we only saw four or—"

"Don't tell me that!" the little man snapped. "I don't forget these blacklegs! That's Speed Daggett! On his record, you can bank on it that he's got his finger in anythin' crooked that's cookin' around here!"

"Let's walk across the street and see what he does," Rip suggested.

The man leaning against the post eyed them darkly, and when they were halfway across, he brushed some imaginery filings from his vest and strolled into the Lucky Boy saloon. The partners continued on up the sidewalk.

"What do you think now?" Grumpy grumbled.

"It's Daggett, all right," Rainbow agreed. "He didn't want to face us. I suppose he's running the games in that saloon. The Lucky Boy may be this fellow Mullhall's place."

"If it is, and he's runnin' with Daggett, we know he's a crook. That's jest puttin' two and two together."

THEY stepped into the first barbershop they found. There was only one chair, and it was occupied.

"Sit down," the barber invited. "I'll be through in a moment. The boy just left the *Monitor*. You'll find it there on the table, if you haven't read it yet."

The partners nodded and sat down. The man who was being shaved was an elderly, robust individual, with a flowing, iron gray mustache. His eyes were closed, and he had nothing to say. When he stood up, he was a fine figure of a man, at least six-foot two. He glanced in the wall mirror briefly and handed the barber a two-bit piece.

"Keep the change, Ed," he said.

"Thanks, Marsh," the barber replied.

The partners were aware of the sharp, impersonal scrutiny the big man gave them, as he walked out.

"You can get in the chair first," Rip told Grumpy. "I'll read the paper a bit."

"Right," the latter accepted.

The barber began to lower the head rest.

"Better put her all the way down," Grumpy advised, with a grin. "That big fella you jest shaved would make two of me."

"Yes," the other agreed, "Marsh is a big man; strong as a bull....Don't believe you've ever been in the shop before."

"No, jest got off the train. Me and my pardner are strangers. Nice little town you got here. Cattle, I reckon?"

"Cattle and sheep, and a little mining. Used to be all mining; gold and cinnabar. There was any number of valuable properties a few miles north of here, up in the Signal Mountains, in those days."

Rip was listening to their conversation, knowing that Grumpy was a past master at drawing a man out and giving away nothing of his own business.

"You always see Nevada at its worst from a car window," the little one was saying. "Comin' along the river, the country looked all burnt out, jest sand and alkali flats and bad lands. I suppose there's good range up in the hills toward the Idaho line."

"Oh, yes," he was told. "Some fine ranches up in Signal Valley, along Horsethief Creek—Seven Up and Rocking Chair. A lot of little outfits up that way, too....You boys are not looking for a nice ranch, are you?"

"No, we got other business here." Grumpy hurried on without giving the man a chance to ask what that business might be. "With the price of beef sky high, a man can't buy a good spread less he's willin' to pay three times what it's worth. The high beef and wool prices ought to be good for this town."

"I don't know," the barber answered pessimistically. "I got no complaint, but there's them that have. The saloons are raking in the money, of course. They say Buck Mullhall is getting rich. He's got a nice place—that big one across from the railroad station, the Lucky Boy."

Stretched out flat in the barber chair, his face smeared with lather, Grumpy could not flick a glance at Rip. To be sure that the latter got this bit of information, he said, "What was the name?"

"Buck Mullhall," the barber replied.

"I meant the name of his saloon," the little one explained.

"The Lucky Boy. As fine a bar as you'll find in Winnemucca or Reno ....You like it pretty close?"

"Yep," Grumpy murmured. "If a man wants to play a little poker in this town, where does he have to go to be accommodated?"

ED TRIMBLE did not answer until he had finished shaving the little man's chin. "That depends on the size of your game," he said, with a smile. "I guess if you step into the Lucky Boy, Speed Daggett will be glad to oblige; he runs an open table. He'll treat you right. Speed's square."

Rainbow had not missed a word. To discover that Daggett and Buck Mullhall were running together was certainly enlightening. He felt that this barber's unsolicited endorsement of Speed as a square-shooter more or less represented the town's opinion of the man. That Daggett was apparently in good standing in the community did not lead Rip to suppose for a moment that the man had changed his ways. It was more likely, he felt that this "honest gambler" front was just a cover-up for some other criminal activity.

"Don't let my partner's big talk fool you," he remarked dryly to the proprietor of the barbershop. "It wouldn't take much of a bankroll to fade us. A two-bit bunkhouse game is about our size."

"Two-bit game!" Grumpy snorted indignantly. "I don't know about that! I've sat in with some of the big shots in my time. This Daggett a local gent?"

"No, he hit town a couple years ago," Ed Trimble informed him. "Hi, Curly!" he greeted a man who put his head in the door. "Just one ahead of you."

"I'll be back," the man said.

Grumpy continued his conversation. Rainbow had found an editorial in the *Monitor,* however, that claimed his attention. It was a blistering attack on the law enforcement agencies of the county in connection with unsolved murder of Tom (Trig) Gordon, the owner of the Rocking Chair. Rip read it through to the last line. By the time he had finished, Grumpy was out of the chair.

"You're next," the barber prompted.

Before laying the newspaper aside

Rainbow made a note of the fact that it was published and edited by Dennis Callaghan. The name had a good, fighting Irish ring, and it was his opinion that if there was one man in Nevada City whose support they could count on, it was the publisher of the Monitor.

"Where'll we find Dennis Callaghan?" he asked Trimble, as the latter adjusted a towel about his shoulders.

"Right down the street, on this side. A frame building. You can't miss it." Somehow, he was less affable than he had been. "Callaghan a friend of yours?"

"We have a little business with him. I see by his column that he's on the prod about some murder you had here."

Trimble nodded resentfully. "Maybe it ain't for me to say, but Red's going pretty far in accusing the sheriff and district attorney of not doing their duty. He's been gunning for them ever since Trig Gordon was killed. Trig had a sum of money on him. Someone stuck him up and had to kill him to get it. No telling who did the job, with strangers drifting up and down the river and dropping across the line from Idaho all the time. Callaghan won't have it any way but that Burling and Pennoyer have fallen down on the job because they haven't got to the bottom of it. That don't make sense to most of us. Marsh Burling's got a lot of friends. He's been sheriff for fifteen, sixteen years. He may be gitting old, but he still knows his business."

"That big man, who was in the chair when we came in—I heard you call him Marsh," Rip said. "Was that Burling?"

"Sure," the barber replied, laying his razor against Rip's cheek.

"I noticed him givin' us the once over," Grumpy piped up. "I didn't see any badge on him."

"Marsh doesn't go in for that much, less he going out to bring a man in," Trimble informed him. "He's a great one for saying nothing and just sawing wood."

THE partners left the shop a few minutes later.

"Wal, we got an earful," Grumpy observed. "This Buck Mullhall and Daggett are as thick as thieves, jest as I figgered."

"It gives us something for a starter," Rip acknowledged. "Did you get a good look at Burling?"

"Yeh! By the cut of his jaw, he's a stubborn, bull-headed gent. Whether he's on the level or not, he's had the run of things here for years; he ain't goin' to like our hornin' into this case. We'll have to put our cards on the table sooner or later. What do you figger we stand to gain by keepin' away from him like this?"

"It may turn out to be plenty," Rainbow answered, his gray eyes shrewd and sober. "I think we can take it for granted that Speed Daggett is the only man in Nevada City who knows us. If Burling comes looking us up directly, we can be sure that Daggett slipped him the information. If the sheriff has to get his facts from men of that stripe, it should give us a pretty good line on his character."

"You got somethin' there," the little one admitted, impressed with the logic of Rip's argument. "Crooks always string together till they're found out. That's about the only answer we could take."

"Not necessarily," said Rainbow. "It would be much easier for me to believe that this Marsh Burling is on the square himself, and is being used by a bunch of crooks....There's the newspaper office. I'm going to open up to this man Callaghan, Grump. He's had courage enough to risk circulation and make himself some enemies. I'm anxious to see how his slant on these killings checks with Miss Glenna Gordon's story."

The room that housed the *Monitor* had been partitioned off in front as an office. There was no one there, but through a window in the partition they could see a red-headed man running a pony press. To make both ends meet, the publisher of the paper took in what job printing he could find. The partners correctly surmised that the rather stout, middle-aged man at the press was Dennis Callaghan. Even at first glance, he

seemed to throw off sparks of intense energy.

"Just a minute!" he called to them. "Sit down if you can find a chair!"

He stepped into the office, wiping his hands on his apron, a few moments later. Rip decided at once that he liked this man with the flaming thatch and wide-set blue eyes.

Callaghan's face lit up the instant he caught their names. "You bet I know who you are!" he declared, pumping their hands. "I've been reading about you for years in my exchanges. I got a big kick out of the way you cleaned up that mess down in Black Rock last fall. Will you boys tell me what you're doing in Nevada City?"

"The Gordon case," said Rip. "His daughter has called us in."

"No!" Callaghan exclaimed incredulously. "That's almost too good to believe. It's the smartest move Glenna Gordon could have made. I've been carrying on a one-man fight for weeks against the do-nothing course our sheriff and prosecutor have been taking."

RAINBOW told him that he had read the editorial in that day's *Monitor*. He also acquainted him with what had been said in the barbershop. Red Callaghan banged his desk violently.

"That's damned rot, Ripley!" he whipped out, an angry glint in his eyes. "Ed Trimble is a wind bag. He's like a lot of other people in this town who won't see beyond the end of their noses. It wasn't anyone drifting up or down the river, or bouncing across the line from Idaho, who killed Trig Gordon. Don't let them try to tell you that. It was a local job; somebody right here in Nevada City got him. If there isn't a dozen wanted men walking the streets of this town, I'm crazy! They've been moving in for the last two years. Some of them don't stay long, but there's always new ones showing up to take their place. I don't mean to tell you the town's lawless. Ordinarily, with a set-up like that, you'd expect a string of stickups and some rustling. That isn't the case; these birds seem to be on their good behavior. But they're here, and it isn't just for their health. I don't pretend to know what their game is, but when one of our leading stockmen is killed in mysterious circumstances, I believe it's reasonable to suppose that they know something about it."

Rip found these observations interesting enough, but he realized they were only the expressions of a man's opinion. "Was it robbery?" he asked.

"I can't make myself believe it was. Cowmen are using that road north to Signal Valley all the time with more than three hundred dollars in their pocket. No one has ever been stuck up before." Callaghan shook his head emphatically. "No, sir! I don't believe money had anything to do with it!"

Grumpy had been sitting back, saying nothing. He put in a question now. "Did Gordon have any personal enemies?"

"I suppose he did," the editor answered. "He was rich. Tom Gordon didn't have that nickname of Trigger tacked on to him for nothing; I suppose he stepped on a lot of men's toes on his way up from the time he started Rocking Chair. There wasn't a foot of fenced range in this part of the country in those days. You know how it went; if you saw something you wanted, it was yours if you could take it and hold it. But I've been over all that. It didn't get me anywhere. You know, of course, that Gordon's Chink cook was found this spring with his head bashed in. You'll hear all about that and some other queer things when you get out to the ranch. Maybe they're related, as Glenna Gordon claims."

"What's your opinion?" Rainbow queried.

Dennis Callaghan pursed his lips thoughtfully for a moment. "I have a pretty definite opinion about it. No one's ever been able to explain why that Chinaman was murdered, beyond putting it down as a grudge killing. It's my idea that Trig Gordon knew the answer, and that it led to his death. That's just my personal

hunch; it's not what I've been hollering about in the *Monitor*. I've just been demanding that some effort be made to get to the bottom of this business. But what can you expect, with a pinhead for a town marshal, a kid who isn't dry behind the ear yet for a prosecutor, and a sheriff who's been running things around here so long he thinks he owns the country? I guess you boys found that out."

"We haven't talked with him yet," Rainbow volunteered.

"No?" Callaghan was peering through the open door. "It looks like you're going to get your chance right now, then. This is Burling crossing the street. He wouldn't be coming here to see me."

From the glimpse they had had of him in the barbershop, the partners were able to recognize the sheriff at a glance. Grumpy's gaze ran beyond Burling to the stocky, rocky-faced man he had left standing on the edge of the sidewalk. They had obviously come down the street together.

"Who's that slat-eyed gent across the way?" the little one asked gruffly.

"That's Buck Mullhall, our leading divekeeper," the red-headed Callaghan answered contemptuously. "Buck's been coming awfully fast the past year; been making money and getting his finger in county politics."

MARSH BURLING stamped into the office, bristling with indignation.

"I gather that you know who I am," he rapped, addressing himself to the partners and ignoring Callaghan. "Are the two of you here on professional business?"

"We are, Burling," Rip informed him. "The Gordon matter."

"I suspected as much!" the sheriff retorted hotly. "I can tell you here and now you'll get no help from me. That Gordon girl had no reason to call you in. I suppose you figure you'll walk right through this case and show me up."

"That would be foolish," Rainbow answered easily. "We're not here to cut any ground out from under you."

"Is that why you didn't look me up when you got off the train?" big Marsh boomed. "Is that why you made a bee-line for the office of this lying sheet?"

His angry bellowing was attracting attention on the street. Grumpy saw Buck Mullhall cross the road and pause in the doorway, his rocky face sharp with hostility. The little one pretended not to be aware of him standing there, but Mullhall didn't move a muscle that he failed to catch. Rip continued to center his attention on the sheriff, not the least impressed by the latter's wrathful explosion.

"If it's not asking too much," he inquired, "how did you learn we were in town?"

"I don't figure that's any of your business!" Burling rifled back. Rainbow gave him a thin smile.

"Maybe I can answer my own question," he said. "We've seen only one man in Nevada City who recognized us. You got your information from him, Burling. I hate to see the law so friendly with a blackleg like Speed Daggett. We ran him out of Wyoming about three years ago. There still may be a warrant out for him."

Mullhall pushed through the door, his hard mouth twisted with rage. "Marsh, how much more of their lip are you goin' to stand for?" he whipped out fiercely.

"Shut up!" Burling snapped. "I'll handle this without any help."

"You better!" Mullhall growled. "I don't care who these gents are; when they start tossin' dirt at a friend of mine, I'll make them eat it! You've known Speed for two years; you know he is as square as I am!"

Rainbow grinned at him with infuriating coolness. "That doesn't give you much of a build up—or maybe you didn't mean to."

It was too much for Buck. He rocketed around on his heels and his hand reached his hip. "I'll button up your lip and tie it up good!" he threatened.

Grumpy had anticipated the move. "Better change your mind," he advised, "or this town will be minus one saloon-keeper."

There was a business-like air about the blue-nosed .45 in the little one's

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There was a business-like air about the blue-nosed .45 in the little one's

fist. Buck took a long moment to think it over. The sheriff helped him to a decision.

"Forget it!" Burling growled, knocking Mullhall's hand aside. "That's enough of this nonsense! Suppose you get out of here, Buck, and go about your business. And you, Callaghan, step into the back room; I've got a few words to say to this pair in private."

Mullhall took his time about leaving. "You better advise these birds to take the next train out," he flung back over his shoulder. "With the start they've made it won't be healthy for 'em here!"

CALLAGHAN went back to the press at which he had been working, a jeering laugh on his lips. Marsh Burling lowered himself into the editor's empty chair and glared across the littered desk at Rainbow.

"Get this," he muttered. "I'm going to talk fast, and keep a straight face about it. What I said a minute back was for the long ears of the jackasses who were listening. I'm supposed to be just a stubborn old fool who's outlived his usefulness. That's the way I want to play it. I've lied myself black in the face to Glenna Gordon. I know better than she does that these killings are related. They're only part of what's going on under the surface on Horsethief Creek. You'll find that out. I can't talk to you here in town, but I'll be up in the valley next week; keep your eyes peeled for me and follow me into the hills; we'll have our powwow then, and without witnesses. In the meantime, I'll buck you and knock you every time I open my mouth. You do the same. Under cover, I'll go with you all the way. D'you understand?"

It was breath-taking.

Rip nodded woodenly. The little one was harder put to master his surprise.

"You knew Daggett was a blackleg?" Rainbow asked.

"Sure! He's only one of many. Look out for Mullhall; I suspect him. I know he's dangerous. It's got to the point where they think I'm just about harmless, the damned fools!"

Marsh brought his fist down heavily on the desk. His blue eyes were frosty under their heavy brows.

"We've got to put on an act for Callaghan. I hate that Irishman's guts. But Dennis is all right. You boys be waiting for me when I ride north."

Hauling himself to his feet, he bellowed at them threateningly and shook his fist at Rainbow. He stormed out then, leaving the partners spellbound.

"What do you think?" Grumpy demanded weakily.

"It's a break that comes only once in a lifetime," Rip answered.

The little one wagged his head skeptically. "It could be an awful neat double-cross."

"Couldn't it?" It was said with a smile, but Rainbow's lips had thinned grimly. "I guarantee you we'll make sure there's no bones in it before we swallow it."

CHAPTER III

Blood On the Sage

"THAT ought to give you a pretty good idea of what you're up against," Red Callaghan declared heatedly, as he rejoined the partners. "A statement like that proves he isn't fit to hold office. I'd like to spread it over the front page of the *Monitor*."

"He gave us both barrels," Rip acknowledged. "But I don't want you to say a word about this in the paper. It would only make the going tougher for us. Was what you heard me say about Daggett a surprise to you?"

"Not a bit! I had him in mind when I told you this town was running over with undesirables. For my money, you can include Buck Mullhall. He's another one of these Honest Johns that you couldn't trust around the corner. But I thought he was too damned shrewd to open up the way he did. We haven't got to the last of the dead men we'll see around here. I'm telling you to look

out for him, Ripley. I know there's better brains than his running this assortment of crooks. But that won't help you any if he goes out to have you knocked off."

"He'll have to do better than pullin' a fool gunplay like he put on jest now if he wants to wash us out," Grumpy growled. "I could smell tinhorn all over him."

They talked with Callaghan for another quarter of an hour. Rip explained how they had arrived in town ahead of time.

"If you want to look the burg over, I'll be glad to show you around," Red offered.

"No, we'll just wander around by ourselves," Rainbow told him. "We'll have to be back at the station in about forty minutes. You'll be seeing a lot of us."

"I hope so." Callaghan accompanied them to the door. "I suppose Nightwind will drive in to get you. You'll like Jim; he's a nice lad. You'll find him cut along your lines."

"A Rocking Chair rider?" Rainbow asked.

"No, the foreman. Old Trig caught him young and made a good cowman out of him."

The partners strolled up the street and turned into a saloon for a drink and to sample the talk. The conversation didn't interest them, however. An old Chinese trudged by as they stepped out. He was balancing a basket of washing on his head.

"Let him get ahead of us a bit and we'll follow him," Rainbow suggested. "He's evidently heading for the Chinese quarter."

The little one flicked a quick glance at him. "Any particular reason?"

"Not at the moment. That doesn't mean we won't have one when we begin putting the threads together on what happened to Gordon's cook."

"Wal, that's interestin'!" Grumpy snapped, with frank irritation. "I thought we was purty well agreed that it wasn't a case of one of his yellow friends gittin' him."

"We agreed that it wasn't what Callaghan calls a grudge killing," said Rip. "That's a long way from saying that a white man got him. . . Walk along, now!"

Another block brought them to the end of the business district. The sidewalk ended, and after passing three or four houses, a fenced pasture lot stretched along one side of the road; on the other, there was a grassy flat, obviously used as a camp ground by cowpunchers and freighters. The land was low here, and the grass was green.

"Gittin' close to the river," Grumpy remarked. "There goes your friend with the clothes basket turnin' off to the left!" Rip nodded.

"Must be a road along there by that line of willows. Stretch your legs a little!"

THEY lost sight of the Chinese for a minute, but when they reached the trees, he was just ahead of them, and beyond Nevada City's Chinatown. It was a drab, dejected-looking collection of buildings of nondescript architecture, stark naked in the sunshine. Ripley's glance ran over it and back to the willows that lined the road.

"Grand trees, these," he said. "I've never seen bigger willows. Must have been here a long time. By the way they're spaced, you can be sure they were planted. Too bad they didn't set out some of them around their houses."

"Perhaps they did, and they got washed out," Grumpy returned. "You can see by the stairs that all them places are raised up off the ground. I reckon the Humboldt floods through here purty bad every spring." He shook his head philosophically. "I don't know why it is, but in these Nevada towns if there's a river or crick around you'll find the Chinks huddlin' as close to it as they can git, come hell or high water."

"Yep, they'll put up with a lot just to have a vegetable garden. We'll walk through the quarter and make it look right by buying a bag of lichee nuts or something."

They were aware of curious eyes following them as they passed the stores. A yellow face appeared above the half-raised shade in the window

of a darkened poolroom. Rainbow caught the Oriental's sharp scrutiny. He read in it the usual suspicion and hostility with which, and with good reason, these desert Chinese regarded all white strangers. The man's attitude changed suddenly. Surprise flowed into his narrowed, slanting eyes. He pulled his lips away from his uneven teeth, then, in what seemed to be an attempt at a friendly smile.

Rip walked on, without breaking stride.

"Be funny," he murmured thoughtfully, "if someone spotted us down here. I suppose these Nevada Chinese move around; some of them may have drifted up here from Black Rock."

The little man's mouth tilted disgustedly. "Yo're still wearin' that jade ring Mei-land Seng gave you. It was supposed to put the okay on you with her people. Why don't you flash it on these fellas. Mebbe they'll run out and give you the lodge grip." Grumpy's tone was definitely sarcastic and mocking.

"That might be an idea at that," Rip returned. There was a sharp edge of annoyance in his voice. "It's done us a couple good turns, whether you admit it or not. Of course, it isn't the ring you're taking a slap at. I don't know why it should always get under your hide to have to acknowledge that that girl saved our bacon."

It brought an angry snort from the little man. "Who ever said she didn't?" he demanded crustily. "But if it's the same to you, I'll take my Chinese with less looks and brains. That Miss Seng was always two jumps ahead of us. I know she's doin' a lot for her people, but I'm jest as well satisfied that she's back in San Francisco and out of our lives. There's somethin' too fascinatin' about her to be good for any man's peace of mind. She had you wingin' around like a sick pigeon." He jerked his head in the direction of a shop window. "There's yore lichee nuts. I don't go for them at all, but I wouldn't mind nibblin' on some of that peanut seed candy."

"Go ahead; I'll wait for you," Rip told him.

The gyrations of a huge kite caught his eye as he stood there. The wind was fresh and steady, and the kite was flying high. The tail had been decorated with a string of brightly colored playing cards. The sun glinted on the embossed backs of the cards.

THE longer Rainbow watched the more interested he became. When Grumpy rejoined him, he took the bag of nuts, and after cracking one between his fingers, suggested that they turn back. He kept his eye on the kite as they walked along. It was being flown from an open field along the river, where several aged horses grazed contentedly.

"I remember that I didn't get anything but a big laugh from you when I once tried to tell you something about kite-flying being a serious business with these yellow men," Rip observed.

"Wal, you laid it on purty thick," the little one declared. "Tryin' to tell me they talk with kites like we use the telegraph."

"That's right; that's what I told you. They've been doing it for a thousand years. I wasn't able to show you how it worked that time, but I can do it this afternoon. Take a squint at that big one up there now."

Grumpy shaded his eyes with his hand and glanced skyward until he located the kite.

"High, all right," he muttered. "Right purty! Flutterin' around a little, but I don't see nothin' queer about it."

"Don't you? You look again. It isn't the wind that's making it dip and drop away like that; the man who's flying it is manipulating it. . . There! Up — down — up — falling away!"

"Yeh! I'm beginnin' to git it!" The little one gave Rainbow a shrewd glance. "You figger it's a code he's worked out?"

"Why not? It ought to be easy. That kite's high; it can be seen a long way. I'll wager this fellow is talking to one of his friends on some

ranch to the north. Suppose we get nearer and watch him a bit; he doesn't see us."

They reached the line of willows unobserved and had a clear view of the field. The Chinese who was flying the kite was a wizened oldster, intent on what he was doing. The kite string was fastened to an iron pin that had been driven into the ground. By throwing his arm over the cord and running up on it, he could pull the kite down; when he threw up his arm, it popped high again. To make it flutter and fall away, he tied a long loop in the twine remaining on the ground, fed it carefully up to the pin, and when the strain of the kite had pulled it taut, a hard jerk released the knot. The kite began to fall crazily until the wind straightened it out and carried it up once more.

"He's working pretty hard at it, isn't he?" Rip observed soberly. "You wouldn't call it sport, would you?"

"By Josephine, no!" Grumpy answered emphatically. "I swear, you've called the turn, Rip! That's a message he's sendin'!"

"Don't get too excited about it," Rainbow advised. "There's no law against flying a kite. It may be innocent enough."

"Yeh? Look at that!"

A young Chinese had darted across the field and was talking excitedly to the old man. The manipulation of the kite ceased abruptly. Rip accepted it as convincing proof that Grumpy and he had chanced on something they were not supposed to see.

"Let's go down there and have it out with them," the little one suggested testily. Rainbow shook his head.

"It wouldn't get us anywhere. We'll just file this away for future reference. Time for us to be getting back to the station."

Grumpy turned for a last look at Chinatown, as they reached the main road.

"Purty early to say where the trail's goin' to lead us," he muttered, with characteristic grimness, "but if it leads us back here, it won't surprise me none."

Though the train was due in a few minutes, they failed to find anyone waiting for them.

"The Rocking Chair foreman may have been here and found the westbound running a little late," Rip suggested as an explanation. "In that case, he's most likely taken advantage of the time to pick up something for the ranch. I'll ask at the window if anyone has been in."

"Jim Nightwind was here a few minutes ago," the agent told him. "He said he'd be back."

RAINBOW was turning away, when he found an obese, moon-faced Chinese at his elbow. It was an impassive face, with the eyes vacant and unreadable behind their mounds of flesh. The suit that clothed his huge bulk was styleless, but the fabric itself had a rich, expensive look. A massive gold watch-chain decorated the man's paunch, and in his right ear he wore a diamond.

Rip's first surmise was that the Oriental was a well-to-do Chinese merchant. He heard him address the agent familiarly as Frank and ask for two tickets to San Francisco.

"Sure, Sam," the other answered. "The missus told me to remember to thank you for that package of jasmine tea you sent over to the house yesterday. You're spoiling her."

The fat man grinned. "It's nice to do favors for a friend," he said, speaking without the faintest trace of "pidgin."

The partners stepped outside.

"Nightwind has been here; he'll be back," Rip explained. "That fat Chinese with the diamond in his ear interests me. He's buying a couple tickets to San Francisco. I wonder who he is."

"Yore guess is as good as mine," the little man replied. "He seems to know his way around; he got a nod from a couple people. That pair of scared-lookin' Chinks sittin' in the corner was with him when he walked in. Here they come now."

The fat man and his two compan-

ions walked down the platform and stood by themselves. The partners continued to watch them. The train was in sight when the man with the diamond turned in their direction. His yellow face was expressionless, but both Rip and Grumpy caught the remote interest with which he regarded them.

There were only two or three passengers for Nevada City. The fat man spoke to his countrymen in their native tongue, his voice rising and falling in vehement gutturals. He put them aboard the train, then, and as soon as it pulled out, he waddled over the tracks and crossed the street to the sidewalk.

The partners were so interested in him that they were not aware of the tall, square-shouldered young man who was studying them with equal intentness from the station doorway. Finally convinced that they must be the men for whom he was looking, he stepped up to them.

"I didn't see you get off the train," he said, "but I take it that you're Ripley and Gibbs." And when Rainbow nodded, the young stranger introduced himself. "I'm Jim Nightwind, Rocking Chair's foreman. I couldn't help noticing that you were giving Sam a lot of your attention."

"Who is that fat Chinaman?" Grumpy asked.

"That's Sam Lee Duck, the boss of Chinatown," Nightwind replied. "He's been around a long time. We've got a lot of Chinese in this country—ranch help and the mining camps. He does their banking and imports dried fish and the like for them. If you'll give me your baggage checks, I'll get your stuff."

"We'll give you a hand with it," Rainbow offered. As Dennis Callaghan had predicted, Rip found it easy to like this young man, who was as tall, lean and wide-shouldered as himself.

"How much of a ride have we got ahead of us?" Grumpy inquired, as they drove away from the station.

"We call it twenty-five miles," said Nightwind. "I've got a fast team here; we'll move right along. We'll have a good supper waiting for us."

Rainbow told him they had been in town for several hours.

"That's too bad," said Jim. "I've been here most of the afternoon myself. I drove Doc Ruddy in. He's our veterinarian. I've just been killing time around his place."

"We've been doing a little of the same," Rip said dryly. "Gave us a chance to size things up."

"Did you run into anything interesting?" Rainbow noticed that the foreman's attention remained on the team.

"CONSIDERABLE. Among other things we managed to have some stiff talk with your sheriff." He gave Nightwind a brief account of what had transpired in the *Monitor* office. The latter's mouth tightened noticeably. And yet, in some way, he seemed relieved.

"I haven't any use for Mullhall," he said. "I've made it a point to let him know exactly what I think of him. It's a different matter with Marsh. I knew he wouldn't roll out the red carpet for you, when he learned why you were here." He shook his head regretfully. "I don't know what to make of Marsh Burling lately. He hasn't seemed to do anything about clearing up this mystery, and yet he tamed this country when it was really wild. It's hard to forget that. . . How did you find him?"

"We're kinda reservin' opinion on him," Grumpy declared. For all of its evasiveness, it was a completely honest answer. Since he felt that Marsh Burling was a subject that might better be left undiscussed, he changed the conversation abruptly. "You was speakin' of this vet. You still losin' stock?"

"Yes, we are! Some days are worse than others, but it averages up to three to four head every twenty-four hours. They're sick one day and dead the next." Nightwind's hands tightened on the reins. "I can't say too much about it around the house, but I'm beginning to wonder where it's going to end. I don't believe anything we've done has helped the situation a bit. A couple days ago I

started putting some of our stuff on our winter range. I hated to use the grass that way—I know we'll need it later on—but that was about the only move I had left. Maybe the stuff won't do any better there. I suppose we'll learn in a day or two. I've known our range a long time. It's pretty hard for me to believe that some sort of poison has suddenly started working up through the soil and getting into the graze."

"Doesn't seem possible that anyone could have doped your range without finding some trace of it," said Rip.

"It wouldn't seem so," Jim agreed, "but I've got to the point where I believe it must have been doped. It's clean range. I've always seen to it that loco weed and wild parsnip has been burned off soon as it appeared. It doesn't seem to be that. Just to see what would happen, I put a healthy yearling on the finest grass we own; you couldn't find a weed in a square mile. That cow was dead three days later. Of course, I know the two of you are here for a definite purpose; I can't expect you to help me out with my problem. And yet, I believe it's related to all the other trouble we've had."

"So do we," Rainbow said without reservation. "If we can get to the bottom of that riddle we may find we have the answer to some other things."

As they crossed the bridge over the Humboldt, he saw Grumpy trying to locate the kite they had seen flying above Chinatown. It was no longer in the air. Occupying the back seat of the buckboard, they could exchange a glance without Nightwind being aware of it. Rip gave the little one to understand that he didn't want anything said about the kite. Instead, he tried to draw the foreman out about the murder of the Rocking Chair cook. There was very little he could tell them, for, according to his story, he had not been on the ranch at the time. His mother had passed away, he said, and he had been in town for a few days on that account.

"I suppose you were home when Gordon was killed," Grumpy put in.

"No, I wasn't," Nightwind answered frankly. "I was on my way to Elko to see some prize Hereford bulls Mr. Gordon was interested in acquiring." His young face appeared enormously sober of a sudden. "I know it was my being away both times that gave rise to the whisper that I know more about this business than I'm saying. I don't know who started that talk, but I have some reason to believe it originated with Mullhall. I thought maybe you'd heard it."

"Don't let it worry you," Grumpy declared stoutly. Rip knew Nightwind had taken the little man's eye, and this expression of loyalty did not surprise him. "That's an old trick for a skunk to throw his dirty smell on decent folks, so he can cover up his own rotten self. Mullhall may not be mixed up in these killin's, but you couldn't make me believe it."

"Jim, tell us something about yourself," Rainbow suggested.

"Nothing much to tell," was the embarrassed answer. "I grew up in town. When I got through high school, I went to Reno to the university for a year. By that time I realized I couldn't support my mother and keep myself going on what I was earning at odd jobs, so I came home and went to work for Mr. Gordon. I've been on the ranch ever since."

RIP nodded. "That sounds like a clean record," he said. He would have liked to have asked Nightwind what the relationship was between him and Glenna Gordon, but he decided to find his own answer.

The sun was dropping already. Jim whipped up the team. In a ten-mile stretch they passed no one. The road was pitching up gently toward the purple bulk of the Signal Range, far to the north. On either side, unbroken wastelands of sage and buckrush ran away for miles. In fact, they had covered two-thirds of the distance to the Rocking Chair before the partners caught their first glimpse of a ranch-house. Ahead of them a fringe of green willows marked the course of a creek. Night-

wind pulled up his team just before they reached it.

"Just ahead there, where the creek crosses the road, is where Mr. Gordon was killed," he explained. "I suppose he was walking his horses across. The trees and brush come so close to the road that they must have got him before he knew what was happening. . . Would you like to get out and look it over?"

Rip was about to say no, when Grumpy suddenly jumped clear of the buckboard and darted into the brush. He had no more than disappeared than a gun roared viciously. Rainbow knew it was not the sharp bark of a six-gun. He could hear dead limbs snapping, the sound moving away from the road. Leaping over the wheel, he called to the little one and began fighting his way through the tangle of willows.

He had not gone far, when a heavy gun roared again. It was followed instantly by the sharp, flat crack of a pistol.

Rainbow stopped and listened. It was still in the trees now.

"Grump!" he called anxiously. "Where are you?"

"Over here!" came the little man's gruff answer. "Jump that crick and bear off to your left a little!"

Rip heard Nightwind coming. Together, they slashed through the brush to Grumpy. They found him standing with a gun in his fist, blood streaking his face from a nasty cut over his left eye. He pointed with his .45 to a huddled figure on the ground.

"That ground sluicin' devil won't blaze away at anyone else!" the little man rapped out fiercely. Rip's face was tight with anxiety as he gazed at him sharply.

"What happened to your face?" he demanded.

"I stumbled over a dead limb!" was the little one's growling answer. "Luckiest thing ever happened to me; my topknot would have been blown off if I hadn't!"

Nightwind turned the dead man over.

"Chinese!" he exclaimed. He shook his head as he gazed at the scarred, contorted face. "He's not a ranch Chinaman. I'd remember that old knife scar if I'd ever seen it before."

Rainbow bent down and went through the man's pockets. He failed to find anything that would identify him. He glanced up at Grumpy. "How did you happen to spot him?"

"Jest as Jim finished speakin', I saw the sun glint on somethin' bright. The next second I saw it was a shotgun barrel. The miserable rat was waitin' for us to cross the crick. He was within ten yards of the road when I started for him. With the two of us sittin' in the back seat, he'd have got one or both of us. He had that gun loaded with buckshot."

Rainbow straightened up. There was a hard, flat look on his lean face. "Somebody's awfully anxious to stop us before we get started," he said thinly. "You walk back to the rig, Grump; I'll wash that cut out and take care of it a little."

"I suppose this means we've got to go back to town and notify Burling," Jim said.

"No, we can go on to the ranch," Rip told him. "We'll leave this fellow right here. You can send a man in early tomorrow morning. We'll ride down then and see what the sheriff makes of it."

THEY made their way back to the buckboard. Nightwind was obviously shaken by the incident.

"Don't let it git to you, son," Grumpy said, with gruff friendliness. "That gent wasn't after you."

"He might just as well have been. You know where I would have stood if he had got the pair of you. Coming on top of the whispers there's been about me, who would have believed the story I would have had to tell?"

"It didn't turn out that way, so we can forget it," said Rip. "You sit down here beside the creek, Grump. Nightwind, you can get that black bag out of the rig. You'll find some white shirts in it. Tear one of them into strips."

"I ain't showin' up at the ranch all bandaged up like a mahatma!" the little one protested irascibly, as he followed Rip down to the water's edge. "A strip of stickin' plaster will do the trick!"

"Time enough for that when we reach the ranch." Rainbow's tone was brusque. "Sit down!" The suspicion that Jim Nightwind had known what was to happen here jabbed him. He dismissed it as absurd.

Grumpy glanced up at him, a hard-bitten look in his puckered eyes. "The message that Chink was sendin' with his kite musta concerned us," he growled under his breath. "Daggett and Mullhall could have had a hand in it."

"It's not likely," Rainbow muttered; "they'd have done a better job. I'm charging this up to the fat man."

The little one's head jerked up in surprise.

"What?" he demanded skeptically. "Sam Lee Duck? How do you git that?"

"It isn't just a stab in the dark," Rip replied. "I'm pinning it on what Dan Ross said to us in Butte. I may be wrong; but I believe we've stumbled on to something."

CHAPTER IV

Riddle of the Dead Men

"WAS THAT Horsethief Creek back there?" Rip asked, as they drove on.

"No, we won't cross Horsethief for a couple miles yet," Nightwind informed him. "We'll have to ford it a couple times before we reach home. That little stream behind us is Silvey's Creek. It doesn't amount to much."

Night had fallen when he told them they had reached Rocking Chair's south line. With his whip, he pointed out the fence, faintly seen in the darkness.

"The country gets better from here on," he said. "This isn't our best range, but we keep some stuff on it until the first of July. You'll find the Horsethief running pretty high. We're still getting some of the spring run-off."

At the lower crossing, they found the water within a few inches of the bed of the rig.

"Quite some water coming down here," Rip remarked. "Where does the creek head?"

"High up in the Signals. It's all over the valley before it gets down here. This is some of Mullhall's range, off to the left. He's got a narrow strip of about two thousand acres in here. It widens out up above us, to the northwest, where the creek swings our way."

"Purty well stocked?" Grumpy inquired.

"I understand he's building it up," Jim answered. "That's just hearsay; I've never set foot on the place since he bought it. There's very few men in the valley who have; Mullhall's never encouraged anyone to drop in on him. The story goes that he keeps a fairly big crew."

"That's interesting," said Rip. "Where did he get his men? Did they come off other ranches around here?"

"Only two that I know of. Both of them are the kind you'd sooner do without. I don't know where he picked up the others; they just seemed to drift in and go to work for him."

Rainbow let it go at that, telling himself it was all of a piece with the other facts they had learned about Buck. Taken together, they fell into such a familiar and definite pattern that he could not help wondering how the man had escaped universal suspicion. There was no doubt left in his mind about Mullhall. And yet, the very ease with which he had put together his picture of him made him wary about accepting it. He realized that Speed Daggett's presence in Nevada City, and his connection with Buck, had helped him to the conclusions he had reached. Even so, he was not ready to accept the obvious without further evidence.

With his brow furrowed into a frown Grumpy puzzled over it, too. But he was a hunch player, and he convinced himself that if the pieces

of this puzzle seemed to drop into place a little easier than usual it was only because they were getting the breaks.

THE moon swung up over the broken hills to the east soon after they turned into the Rocking Chair road. They could see the house ahead, a rambling story-and-a-half building with a covered gallery, set under towering Lombardy poplars. When Nightwind drove them into the yard, the partners exchanged an impressed glance. Their quick appraisal of the place had taken note of a dozen details, the comfortable-looking bunkhouse, the kitchen and dining room for the crew, the whitewashed blacksmith shop and other ranch buildings, all in excellent repair. They needed no more to tell them that Trig Gordon had put an outfit together, here on the southern slope of the Signals, in which any stockman could take pride.

Nightwind had his own cottage. He pulled up at the door, and a man came across the yard to take care of the team.

"We can go in for a minute and wash up a little," Jim told the partners. "If you want to trade that bandage for a strip of tape, Grumpy, I can fix you up. Miss Gordon told me to bring you up to the house for supper. She'll be waiting."

"Fine," said Rip. "Speaking of supper, is this new cook of yours a Chinese?"

"No, a white man, Henry Tandy. You'll hear the men calling him Sugar." Nightwind laughed. "I stole him away from the Bliss Brothers, over on the Little Humboldt. We better bring your stuff in; I've got a spare bedroom; you can bunk with me."

Though the circumstances under which they met Glenna Gordon had a tragic background, the partners were struck at once by her quiet courage and graciousness. Her smile had a boyish frankness. Her high, broad forehead and strong mouth spoke as eloquently of her Scotch ancestors as did her chestnut-colored hair and steady, candid blue eyes.

"Suppose we have supper first and do our talking later," she suggested. "I'm sure you must be hungry. I know Jim is."

"These long-legged fellas jest look the hungriest, Miss Gordon," Grumpy averred, his nostrils wrinkling in an anticipatory sniff of delight as they stepped into the dining room and Hilda, Glenna's Swedish girl, placed a heaping platter of nicely browned biscuits on the table. "Yo're overlookin' the most powerful appetite in the house."

"If that's the case, you sit right here at my right," Glenna said lightly. She found herself liking the little man, and she gave him a warm smile. "I'll see to it personally that you are not overlooked on Rocking Chair—Grumpy?"

"Shucks, I wouldn't feel to home if you called me anythin' else," he declared, with a grin.

Rainbow was silently amused at seeing his pint-size partner unbend to Glenna so quickly. He knew that the little one was a hard man to know, as a rule, and sparing in his friendships. He had already lowered the bars to Jim Nightwind. For him to give his confidence to two people on such short notice was something he had never been known to do before. Rip felt it augured well for their success. "He's poison, when he takes a personal interest in a case," he said to himself. "If I read the signs correctly, I'll have a hard time keeping up with him from now on."

Before supper was half over, Rip felt it would never be necessary for him to ask Nightwind what the relation was between Glenna and himself. They had unconsciously given him his answer in a dozen ways. Whether they realized it or not, he knew their mutual trust and understanding sprang from something more personal than the usual bond existing between foreman and owner. It seemed reasonable to believe they would be married one day. The ranch that Trig Gordon had left to his daughter would be Jim Nightwind's then.

It prompted a thought that Rain-

bow had to face. No matter how he felt about it, the fact remained that the man would come into a fortune through the death of Glenna's father. It had undoubtedly inspired whatever talk there had been about him.

"IT'S ALL wrong," Rip argued with himself. "I can suspect anybody if necessary, but I'll have to be shown this time."

Studying Jim across the table, Rainbow was convinced that the man realized the unfortunate position in which circumstances had placed him, and that it weighed heavily on him. He had avoided saying anything about their experience at Silvey's Creek. Rip liked him the better for his reticence, but he felt there was every reason why Glenna should be told. He saw the color drain out of her face as he gave the details. She sat up stiffly.

"I don't suppose I should be surprised after what has already happened," she said, her tone betraying her anxiety. She glanced at Nightwind. "I thought you were holding something back, Jim."

"I knew Rainbow would tell you if he wanted you to know," he explained. "It makes me wonder if Burling was as wrong as we thought he was in insisting that Cheng's death would eventually be traced back to Chinatown."

Glenna shook her head. "I can't believe it—at least, not for the reasons he suggested. I'm sure Cheng Wah was murdered only because he had discovered some secret on this ranch that was either so valuable, or so dangerous, to someone that he was put out of the way to protect it."

"That's an interesting slant," said Rainbow. "It may be the correct one, Miss Gordon. You would not speak with such deep conviction unless you had some evidence on which to pin your contention."

Glenna shook her head. "I'm afraid I haven't anything that you would call evidence, Mr. Ripley. But there are a number of little things I can tell you that seem to make any other conclusion impossible. To begin with, Cheng Wah never went to town oftener than once every second month; he'd go in then only to trade his wages for certificates on the China Specie Bank of California; he saved every cent he earned. After his death, the bank informed us that he had over seven thousand dollars on deposit with it."

"Remarkable," Rip observed. "I suppose he did his business through Sam Lee Duck." Glenna's confirmation of this led him on to another question. "What's happened to that seven thousand?"

"The bank is still holding it and trying through the Chinese counsel to find the legal heirs. If you are thinking that Cheng might have been killed for his money, I believe you can dismiss the thought; the China Specie Bank is a reliable institution, and, in a matter of this kind, exceedingly careful."

"I think we can take that for granted," said Rainbow. "To get back to Cheng; you're sure he had no enemies among his own people. Is that based just on your personal observation of him?"

"Not altogether. The coroner came a few hours after the body had been discovered. He had just given his permission to have it removed for burial, when a delegation of Nevada City Chinese arrived and begged our consent to having a funeral in Chinatown and placing Cheng Wah in their cemetery. Sam Lee Duck was their spokesman; he's the most influential man among them. He spoke at length of the esteem in which Cheng had been held by his people."

Rip and Grumpy traded glances. The sinister figure of the fat man was beginning to take possession of their thoughts almost to the exclusion of Buck Mullhall and Daggett.

The little one directed a question at Glenna. "Durin' the time this fella Cheng was on the ranch, did you have any other Chinese here?"

"NO, HE was alone, Grumpy, and perfectly happy. The Jackmans always keep a Chinese cook on Seven Up, but Cheng never visited back and forth. Whenever he got

the chance, he was out with a pan and a prospector's pick. You may have been told that a generation ago there was considerable mining done in the Signals and along Horsethief Creek. I don't believe Cheng ever found so much as a color. In fact, Melody Malone, one of our old hands, told me once that Cheng didn't even know where to look for values, and Melody is an experienced miner, among other things. But never finding anything had no effect on Cheng Wah. When the round-up wagon went out last fall, and things were quiet here, Father gave him a couple days off. Cheng took to the upper creek at once. I encountered him as far north as what we call the Opening, where the Horsethief first comes out of the mountains. That must be all of twenty miles from the house."

"It's all of that," Nightwind confirmed. He was listening patiently to details he had heard many times.

"He had walked every step of it," Glenna continued. "I'm speaking of this at length because I believe it was while he was engaged in his crazy prospecting that Cheng stumbled on to the secret that led to his death. He was always alone, and continually venturing into tangled country that we do not see, as a rule."

Nightwind smiled indulgently. "Cheng certainly got around, but I doubt that he ever poked his nose into a square foot of this country that I missed." He turned in his chair and spoke directly to Rainbow. "Glenna and I have argued this question many times," he said. "We always disagree on it, her point being that when I go abroad on this range I've got a horse under me and cover a lot of territory in a day's riding. That's true, of course, I've always kept my eyes open, though."

"Certainly!" Glenna echoed. "But the things you look for, Jim, concern the security and prosperity of the ranch. That was not the case with Cheng; he never had anything but his curiosity to keep him company."

"Miss Gordon, have you any idea what it was that Cheng saw?" Rip asked. "You seem to agree with Jim that it was not a matter of someone using a running iron on one of your steers." He could have answered his own question and been reasonably certain he was right, and he felt that Grumpy could have done the same.

"No, if it was a crime he witnessed, it could hardly have been rustling," Glenna replied. "In the light of what followed, I'm not sure that it wasn't his own secret, rather than another man's, that was responsible for what happened. Cheng could have found a vein of gold and been caught at it. It needn't have happened this spring. When he went out in March, it was the first warm spell we had; the sun had taken off the snow here, but there was still plenty of it along the upper creek. He couldn't have gone far that day."

"I've got to go ag'in you on that, Miss Glenna," Grumpy declared emphatically. "It jest doesn't hold water. If you had a gold strike mixed up in this mess, you'd know it for shore by now. The interested parties would've pretended to make their discovery, filed their claim and got to work. As I understand this Nevada minin' law, you couldn't have stopped them. They wouldn't have had to try to buy the ranch, or be interested in runnin' it down. The law allows a prospector to enter private lands, if he's a citizen of these United States, and prospect thereon for valuable minerals. He's responsible to the owner for any damage he does."

"The law says unfenced and unimproved range lands," Glenna corrected him. "There isn't an inch of Rocking Chair line that isn't under fence."

"Wal!" the little man grunted, not a bit abashed. "Am I wrong about it, Rip?"

"I know such a provision has been written into the basic mining law of most of these western states," Rainbow told him. "Your suggestion is plausible enough, Miss Gordon, but, to speak frankly, I doubt that we'll find the solution to our problem in that direction. What I'd like to do now would be to have a look at a good-sized map of this part of the

country, especially to familiarize myself with the boundaries of Rocking Chair and the country to the north of us."

"We have a map hanging on the wall in the office that will give you that information," said Jim.

"Suppose we finish our coffee in there," Glenna suggested.

WHEN they stepped into the office Nightwind pushed a chair aside, so that they could get close to the map. With a pencil he traced the boundaries of Rocking Chair.

"Beginning over here, we've got the big Seven Up outfit all along our east line," he explained. "In this southeast corner there's a small outfit, but a good one; the Circle A. Their range ends where you see the little cross. Working on west from there, all the way back to the Nevada City road, there's only waste land to the south of us." He put his pencil to the map again. "Here's where Mullhall's range begins to come up against us. We've got him along our west boundary all the way to the Opening. You can see that the Horsethief is the line. The Signal Mountains give us a natural barrier to the north."

Rainbow studied the map with interest. Grumpy gave it a piercing squint and asked a pertinent question.

"When this fella Cheng Wah went out prospectin', did he always head up the creek?"

Glenna nodded and Jim said, "I never ran across him anywhere else. He knew it was along the Horsethief that the discoveries had been made years ago. You can see the old workings up the canyon."

Rip was listening. Nightwind's statement further convinced him he could explain the death of the Chinese cook.

"Wal, that narrows things down considerable for us," Grumpy declared. "How much of this wildcat prospecting has been done around here of late?"

"Very little," Glenna told him. "We heard that Buck Mullhall had grubstaked a couple men last summer. You saw them along the creek, Jim, you told me."

"Several times," Nightwind agreed. "They disappeared, then. The talk in town was that they had moved across Mullhall's range to Squaw Mountain and located something. Mullhall had some samples on display in the Lucky Boy. I believe the claims were registered. But that seemed to be the end of it. You know how those things usually pan out."

Though he was absorbed with something else Rip nodded and pretended to be interested. "Tell me this, if a man wanted to move into this country without being seen, which way would he come?"

"He'd most likely come in from the north—across the Snake River Plateau to the Opening. He could swing around Mullhall's range then, or work down through it." Nightwind hesitated, a troubled look in his eyes. "I hope your question doesn't mean that you think a stranger is responsible for the trouble we've had.

"Only indirectly," said Rainbow. He turned back to the map and tapped it just above the Idaho line. "Are there any ranches up there?"

"No, just broken lava plains. After you leave the Snake River towns there isn't anything but sage-brush ahead of you till you get down here. About the only white man you might run into would be Newt Furey. He used to round up wild horses and drive them down to Nevada City."

"Used to?" Rip queried.

"He hasn't showed up for a couple years. Somebody told me Newt was trapping coyotes for the bounty money and pelts. He built himself a shack at what he calls the Medical Springs—they're just hot springs, with a little sulphur in them. He homesteaded the land years ago. I've stopped there a couple times on my way up to Jordan Valley, just to hear him spout about the fortune the springs are going to bring him some day. He's a dirty, lawless old coot."

JIM'S description of Newt Furey and his lonely shack on the Snake River Plateau fitted perfectly

into the picture the partners were putting together in their minds.

"That old varmint may be doin' somethin' more than trappin' coyotes," the little one observed.

Rainbow was of the same opinion, but he quickly swung the conversation with a question about the Opening.

"It's a mile-wide gouge through the Signals that was scooped out by glacial action," Glenna explained. "The mountain wall rises sheer on both sides for two thousand feet. It's like having an open door to Idaho for this section of Nevada. I can't imagine anyone coming or going any other way, whatever his business. But the murderers of my father didnt' have to come through the Opening; they were never any farther away than Nevada City."

With commendable emotional restraint she told them about her father and how he had met his death. But although she spoke for almost an hour, supplying the partners with the most intimate details of his life, she was the first to acknowledge that she had acquainted them with very little beyond what they already knew.

"That little may prove to be exceedingly important," Rip assured her. "If it does nothing else, it knocks the bottom out of the theory that your father knew Cheng's secret and kept it to himself because he didn't want to alarm you. When you noticed that he was setting out for town that morning without his gun, and he brushed aside your suggestion that he wait until you got it for him, it was the best evidence in the world that he had no idea he was in danger. That wouldn't have been the case if he had been holding back anything."

Glenna stared at him aghast for a moment. "Why, Father was as much at sea over what happened to Cheng as we are!" she exclaimed, with a touch of resentment. "He did everything he could to stir Sheriff Burling to action. Certainly, Mr. Ripley, you don't mean to tell me you considered such a possibility."

"I haven't dismissed it completely even now," Rainbow said flatly. "Until the evidence proves otherwise, I'm willing to believe that Cheng and your father were killed for the same reason. In other words, because they knew too much, or someone thought they did. They were cold-blooded murders, committed by men who will kill without compunction as often as that seems to be the best way of protecting themselves. What happened at Silvey's Creek this evening proves that." The set of his mouth reflected his soberness. "In your letter, Miss Gordon, you expressed the fear that an attempt might be made on your life. I don't want to alarm you, but I feel it's my duty to tell you that you may be in some danger. You may not agree with me that your father was rubbed out because these wolves suspected that Cheng had gone to him with his story; but if I happen to be right about it, it follows that they've been asking themselves if you know, too. The fact that you've called us in may convince them that you do."

Glenna was impressed, and she did not pretend otherwise. "You put it bluntly," she murmured. "It frightens me, of course."

"Glenna, Rainbow wouldn't be warning you without reason," Nightwind said, with obvious anxiety. "I've pleaded with you many times to be careful."

"I know," she acknowledged, "but I can't stay cooped up in the house."

"That isn't necessary," Rip told her. "If you feel like visiting your neighbors, or going to town, just be sure you don't go alone. In fact, I advise you not to ride your own range unless you have one of your men with you—at least until we know where we stand."

"Very well," she agreed. She gave him a long, shrewd glance. Rainbow could feel her eyes searching his. "Mr Ripley—you've put your finger on something already, haven't you? You know why Cheng and my father were murdered, don't you?"

"NO," he protested, "it's far too early for me to be jumping to conclusions. My mind will be wide open about it until I've checked on

a number of things and explored all the possibilities. We'll go to Silvey's Creek in the morning. We'll get an early start."

Grumpy glanced at his watch. "Wal! 'Leven o'clock already!" Nightwind started to get to his feet Rip stopped him.

"Jim, have you got anyone riding night-herd on the stuff you put on your winter range?"

"No, I haven't—"

"I want you to do it," Rainbow told him. "You better turn a couple of your boys out tonight. If we can watch those cows for a few days, it'll tell us whether it's some disease they've got, or something they're eating that's killing them. There's another suggestion I'd like to make I know the Department of Agriculture conducts an experiment station in connection with the university, in Reno. I'm sure if you'll write them an explanatory letter, Miss Gordon, they'll send a biologist up here. We're acquainted with Dr. Shanks. You can tell him we're at Rocking Chair and that I'd appreciate it if he could come personally."

"I don't believe it's anything growing on our range that's responsible."-Nightwind reiterated.

"Neither do I," Rip agreed. "I'm interested principally in having Dr. Shanks make an autopsy on one of your cows as soon as it drops."

"I think it's an excellent idea," Glenna said. "I'll write him tonight. You can take the letter into town in the morning, Jim."

"You better send a man with it," Rainbow advised. "We may not be going all the way in."

They said good night to Glenna a few minutes later. When they reached Nightwind's cottage, he continued on across the yard to the bunkhouse. "Don't wait up for me," he called back. "You'll find an extra blanket in the closet if you need it."

Grumpy followed Rip into the bedroom and started to pull off his boots at once. This was the first moment they had had alone together since arriving at the ranch. The tall man expected Grumpy to take advantage of it at once and express his opinion regarding what their long talk with Glenna and Nightwood had developed. Instead, he had nothing to say. It was unusual enough to prompt the tall man to ask if he felt all right. The little one pulled himself out of his scowling preoccupation briefly.

"If I didn't feel okay, I'd say so!" he snapped. Rip tried again. "You didn't have too much to say all evening. Something on your mind?"

"It's what's on yore mind that's got me tied into a knot," was the acrimonious response. "You remind me of the fella that couldn't see the forest because he was lookin' at one of the trees."

Rainbow smiled. "You certainly sound like you're feeling okay. Where have I gone wrong?"

"On this Chinese stuff. The Gordon gal nailed you; you've got this thing all figgered out already. This Sam Lee Duck, accordin' to you, is mixed up in runnin' Chinks into Nevada and shippin' 'em to 'Frisco. You figger that the cook got an eyeful of it, and got knocked off; that Trig Gordon was killed for about the same reason. That may be true, but I'm tellin' you yo're crazy if you think that's all there is to it. The stakes are higher than that. Mebbe I'll be able to prove it to you tomorrow mornin'."

Rainbow's amsued complacency faded abruptly. Experience had taught him that the little man was seldom as exercised as this without reason. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded sharply.

"Rip, there's a lot of fingers in this pie! That's one thing we don't have to guess about. For all we know Burling may be in on it; maybe they've bought off this young prosecutor, Pennoyer. If that's the case, you know there wouldn't be money enough comin' out of runnin' Chinks to satisfy all hands."

"Perhaps not," Rip admitted. "Seems to me that's a pretty good reason for believing the sheriff and Pennoyer aren't mixed up in it."

"Yeh? What will you say if they indict me for shootin' that Chinaman? I don't care what the facts

were; they can rig up a charge that will take me out of circulation for a few weeks. Can you think of a better way of stoppin' us?"

IT WAS so startling that it took Rainbow's breath away for a moment. He glared at Grumpy incredulously. "That's the most preposterous thing I ever heard you say!" he exclaimed. "If that's all that's troubling you, go to sleep and forget it. For one thing, you ought to know they couldn't get away with it. But I'll give you an even better reason: the man or men who sent that fellow out to pot us will be more anxious than we are to hush it up."

"Is that so?" Grumpy growled, yanking off his pants and tossing them on a chair. "Don't be surprised if we find Burling waitin' for us when we reach the crick in the mornin'."

They were at Silvey's Creek a few minutes after seven.

"No one here," Rip observed. Jim Nightwind jerked around in his saddle.

"Did you expect to run into someone?" he asked.

Rainbow shook his head. "I didn't, but Grump had a nightmare last night to that effect."

"Don't talk too quick!" the little man growled. He was bent low, studying the road. "Been someone here in the last couple hours! Fresh tracks leadin' off into the brush!"

All three got down and looked at them. Rip's mouth tightened as suspicion whipped through him.

"Look out for this!" he rapped. "They certainly figured we'd be back; it may be another bushwhacking."

They left the horses at the road and started through the brush, moving warily and prepared to throw themselves to the ground at the first flash of a gun. The way in which the tracks quartered back and forth said plainly that the man who had made them was searching for something. In the soft creek bank Grumpy found a clear-cut impression of a boot heel.

"White man," he muttered. "Chinks don't wear boots. Musta been a long-legged gent."

They were within a few yards of the spot where they had left the body. By a step or two Grumpy was the first to reach it. A yelp of surprise was torn from him. The blood-stained sage was there, but the body was gone.

CHAPTER V

Rendezvous With Danger

THEY saw where the body had been dragged through the brush. It was a simple matter to follow the trail. It brought them out to the road, fifty yards south of the creek. A horse had been tethered there. The tracks in the dust left no doubt that the dead Chinese had been lifted up on the animal, and that whoever had come for the body had then ridden off with it.

"Looks like we missed a trick here," Grumpy lamented. "We shoulda laid out in this neighborhood last night. It woulda been jest horse sense to figger that when that Chink didn't git home someone would be lookin' for him."

"We missed a trick, sure enough," Rainbow admitted, "but it wasn't missed on Silvey's Creek. Everything considered, I'm just as well satisfied that we didn't see that body being lugged away. Not that I wouldn't like to know who got it. On the other hand, we couldn't have run into the man without telling him more than I want anyone in that gang to know for the present."

The little one understood him well enough. Nightwind looked puzzled. The former attempted to explain. "It's one thing for a crook to suspect yo're interested in him, and quite another for him to know you actually are." Grumpy looked at Rip. "What do you figger they'll do with that Chink?"

"Bury him somewhere. It doesn't interest me particularly. . . Jim, how long will it take us to get to Newt Furey's place?"

The question startled Nightwind.

"That's quite a ride. Five hours, at least."

"Well, we better get started," said Rainbow. "I wish I had followed my hunch and gone up last night."

The young foreman's glance travelled from Rip to Grumpy and back. "I don't want to speak out of turn," he observed apologetically, "but am I to understand that you see a connection between what happened here and old Newt?"

"An important one, I believe," Rip answered. "I'm of the opinion we won't be the only visitors he will have today. I'd give a lot to be the first, but I haven't much hope of that."

"Okay," Nightwind murmured, apparently as much in the dark as ever. "We'll turn back and follow this road up the valley to the Opening." He started for the horses.

"Just a minute!" Rainbow exclaimed. He knew the time had come for him to put his faith in Nightwind to the test. What lay ahead of them on the Snake River Plateau he had no way of knowing. He had a nose for trouble, however, and the feeling was strong in him that this trip was earmarked with danger, even to their finding their lives in jeopardy. He felt he couldn't ask a man to take that chance if he couldn't trust him. It boiled down to either taking Nightwind into his confidence, or going it alone with the little one. For better, or for worse, he chose the first course. "I don't want you to go into this blind," he said. "I'm going to speak frankly. I believe we're up against one end of a smuggling ring that is running alien Chinese into Nevada from the Northwest. It's a federal offense, punishable by long prison terms. That's why I said last night that these men will kill just as often as they find it necessary."

NIGHTWIND'S amazement was genuine enough to convince Rip that it was not simulated. Briefly, he gave him the picture as he saw it.

"Seems hard to believe that I could have been around here the way I have and not tumbled to what was going on," said Jim. "I'm beginning to understand why you were so interested in the Opening and the country up above. Is it your idea that Furey's shack is being used as a hide-out?"

"I think Chinese are being held there for a day or two before they're shipped down this way. They walk, of course. They could leave Furey's place at dark and be through the Opening soon after dawn. Whoever is handing out the orders to this gang knows what happened here by now. You can depend on it that the first move he'll make will be to get word north. If Furey's got aliens there, he'll be told to get them out of the way in a hurry."

"That's only the half of it," Grumpy asserted. "How far do you think we'll git before we're spotted? Don't be surprised if we have to shoot this out."

"It won't surprise me a bit," Rip told him. "It's up to you to decide if you want to tag along with us, Jim. We could use you."

"That's good enough for me," Nightwind rejoined without hesitation. "If that's all we've been waiting for, let's get going."

Setting a pace that the tough-fibered broncs could maintain for hours, they left Silvey's Creek behind and began the long ride up the valley. The sun was shining, but the morning was raw for April. Up in the Signals little patches of snow still lingered. Down below, the grass was green. The partners had a cowman's eye for good range, and they were outspoken in their praise of this high country.

They passed the road into the Rocking Chair house and continued to head north. Grumpy was the first to notice two riders angling across the Gordon range.

"Some of your crew," he said to Jim. The latter recognized the two men.

"Shep Rockingham and Honey Niggeling," he volunteered. "Two of our top hands. When I need a straw boss, Shep is my man. I sent Honey and him out last night to keep an

eye on that bunch of cows, as you suggested, Rainbow. I suppose the day men have just relieved them; I'm going to keep a couple of the crew there right along."

"Give Rockingham a yell," Rip suggested. "It'll only take us a minute or two to learn how that stuff is doing this morning."

The two Rocking Chair riders answered Nightwind's hail and turned toward the road. They jerked a nod at the partners without waiting for any introduction. Bunkhouse chatter had identified the latter almost as soon as they reached the ranch.

"How does the stuff look this morning, Shep?" Nightwind asked the taller of the two punchers.

"Chipper as you could wish. We've had that bunch in here about seventy-two hours now. No sign of anythin' wrong with a one of 'em yet."

"That's certainly good news," Rainbow declared.

"It's the best I've had in over two weeks!" Jim returned heartily. "No question but what it was the grass that was killing them; it was doped. We didn't move any sick stuff, but these cows were cut out of a bunch that had sick ones in it."

"You got the right answer," Grumpy asserted. "You want to make it plumb impossible for these low-down skunks to poison yore winter range. That's more important now than ever."

"No question about it," Nightwind agreed. "We'll double our guards. When you get in, Shep, send a couple men out to join Malone and McCord. We'll be gone the rest of the day, so you boss this job. Keep at least four of the boys on the prowl. If you run into anything that looks suspicious don't hesitate to use your guns."

SHEP ROCKINGHAM nodded. "I'll attend to it," he said. Wheeling their horses, Honey and he rode on. Rip caught the pleased look on Niggeling's homely face, and he told himself that if the Rocking Chair crew measured up to the level of these two that no one would push them around very much.

From a slight rise the partners could see the Horsethief swinging westward. In the course of a mile, creek and road met. They ran side by side then, through open flatlands at first and then in a shallow canyon. Gradually the canyon deepened.

"Getting into the hills," Rip observed, as he saw the canyon walls rising higher and higher. "Will we have any trouble climbing out of here?"

"No, we'll leave the creek before it really begins to bury its nose in the Signals," Nightwind told him. "Did you notice those old tailings up there? That was the Old Glory mine. It was the biggest producer of them all. You'll see other old mines along here. Nothing much left of them but memories."

"That's all Mullhall's range on the other side of the crick?" the little one asked.

"Yes, all along here. That's his wire."

The growling Horsethief filled the canyon with its noises. It was without any inkling of their presence, therefore, that they swung around a bend and found themselves abreast of two men who, ostensibly, were riding Mullhall's line and repairing fence. They jerked an impersonal nod at Nightwind, pretended to go on with their work.

"They're more interested in us than they're lettin' on," Grumpy muttered. "Who are they, Jim?"

"The one with the beard is Quinn River Bill Jensen; the other is Biff Darnell. They've been working for Mullhall some time."

"Just ride on," Rainbow ordered, as Grumpy started to swing around in his saddle. "I'll put the glasses on them when we get beyond this point." To Nightwind, he said, "This Quinn River Jensen doesn't look like a cowpuncher to me. What's his game?"

"He's done some mining. Years ago he ran the stage station at Iron Springs, and a dirty hole he made it. He's one of the pair Glenna told you Mullhall grubstaked last year. . . You want to pull up here a minute?"

"Yeh, I just want to have a look at that pair." Rip turned back a few feet and raised his binoculars to his eyes. A sharp grunt of satisfaction escaped him immediately.

"I didn't think they were repairing fence," he jerked out. "They're high-tailing it down the canyon in a hurry. That pair was posted here on the creek just to spot us if we happened to be heading north. You can take it for granted that we'll have company long before we get across the plateau!"

"We can give them a run for it," Nightwind suggested. "If they're going all the way into Mullhall's place to report, we ought to be through the Opening before anyone overhauls us. These broncs will stand a little pushing."

"Good Josephine, let's throw the steel into 'em then!" Grumpy rapped. "We don't want to be caught in here!"

He pulled his mount into a gallop, and the others did the same. When they had covered another mile and a half they could see where the road worked up out of the canyon. They whipped across the last fording of the Horsethief, the spray flying, and settled down to the short, sharp climb to the plateau. When they reached it they had the Opening before them, breath-taking in its massive grandeur when seen for the first time. It wasn't just a wide mountain-pass. It was what Glenna had called it, a mile-wide gouge through the entire bulk of the Signal Range, from topmost crag to baseline, and so neatly done as to suggest the illusion that some unknown race of giants had hacked it out with mighty cleavers and carted the debris away.

THROUGH this mighty slot, looking to the north, the sage-brush plains could be seen stretching away to the horizon. Ten miles away, standing like a protecting fortress, a flat-topped mountain rose out of that gray-green sea of sage and sand in lonely splendor.

"Haul up a minute!" Rainbow called out. "We'll breathe the horses a minute and I'll see what's behind us."

"If they're coming after us from Mullhall's place they'll swing into the Opening from the southwest," Jim advised. "Look along that low ridge."

"Don'e see anything of 'em," Rainbow announced. "At least we've got open country ahead of us now; they won't be able to jump us." He swung around and put his glasses on the west wall of the Opening and then studied the mountain that rose up out of the broken plain. "I'd like to have a look at this country when I had the time for it. Is there water on that big butte?"

"Yes, there's a couple good springs on Sentinel Butte," Jim assured him. "We'll go up just to the east of it."

"These hosses are purty hot," Grumpy complained. "We shouldn't be standin' here jabberin', less we want 'em to git stiff."

They went on. Their pace was slower now. Rainbow studied their back trail several times. When they were halfway to the butte, he used his glasses once more. The little one was watching him and saw his mouth tighten.

"Comin', eh?" he rapped.

"Yeh! Just swinging through the Opening. Three of them. We've been kicking up considerable dust. They'll spot it soon, if they haven't already."

They halved the distance to Sentinel Butte. It didn't take the glasses to tell them that the pursuers were gaining on them.

"Maybe we could shake them off by swinging around the butte," Nightwind suggested.

Rainbow didn't answer at once. The little one had been scrutinizing the base of the mountain. The wall seemed to rise unbroken for the first several hundred feet. "Don't look like that's any place for us to make a stand," he declared grimly. "We couldn't put the hosses up that slope. How is it on the other side?"

"It's all right. The going's easy, and there's cover enough."

Nightwind and Grumpy glanced at Rip.

"We'll try it!" he called to them. "Maybe we can trick them at that! Don't swing into the butte until we've passed it! We'll be out of sight of them for a few minutes; that'll give us time enough!"

They raced past the mountain as though they were intent on keeping their course to the north. Once they had the shoulder of the rocky fortress between them and the toiling riders behind they swung back quickly and found no difficulty in working up the broken face of the butte to a position in the high brush that offered abundant defensive possibilities.

"This is all right!" Grumpy growled. "I could hold off the three of 'em single-handed!"

Rip nodded. "We'll be ready for them. It won't be long before we know what their intention is." The little one gave him a surprised scowl.

"Do you mean to tell me there's any doubt of it in yore mind? They may go bustin' by without suspectin' anythin', but it won't take 'em long to discover we ain't ahead of 'em no more. They'll come poundin' back, then, and know right where to look for us!"

"Don't be too sure about it. These men may be carrying a message to Newt Furey. If they are, they may decide that the important thing is for them to get there with it, instead of turning back to tangle with us. We'll have the answer to that and a couple other things in a few minutes."

When they swept into view the three men were riding hard. They were well out from the butte, and they gave no sign of turning in. Rainbow slapped the glasses on them at once.

"Wal?" the little man demanded impatiently.

"It's Speed Daggett, Grump! I don't know the other two— Here, Jim! Take a look at 'em!"

Nightwind's identification of the two men with Daggett was quick and certain. "Slick Hanaford and a gent named Springer—two of Mullhall's crew!"

Ripley refused to be surprised. "We can quit guessing about friend Buck," he declared. "He's one of the ringleaders in this business, along with Daggett and the fat man."

GRUMPY had grabbed the binoculars. "It's Speed, shore enough!" he growled. "He's standin' up in his stirrups and yellin' somethin' at the other two! I knew it! They're pullin' up!"

They could see Daggett haranguing the others and pointing back in the direction of the butte. A few moments later, however, they straightened their horses out and broke away to the north.

Nightwind turned to Rainbow to find a mixed look of disappointment and satisfaction on the tall man's lean face. "It looks like you called the turn," Jim said. "Newt's shack is the only place they could be lining out for in that direction."

"Is there any way we can get there ahead of them?" Rip asked.

"There's no short cut, if that's what you mean. By the way they're crowding their broncs they'll have a two-mile advantage on us by the time we get clear of the butte. I'm afraid it puts us a bad last."

The tall man nodded soberly. "I'm afraid it does. It means there won't be much for us to see when we get there."

"If that's the case, why risk gittin' our pants shot off for nothin'?" Grumpy demanded bluntly. "You know we'll have to ride in with their guns trained on us!"

"Not necessarily," Rip argued. "If Furey's holding a couple underground passengers there, Daggett will run them out into the brush in a hurry. If we give him time enough to get rid of the damaging evidence, he may be smart enough to try to play innocent with us. I'd expect the fat man to be shrewd enough to do it that way, and I surmise that Speed is getting his orders from him. We'll get enough out of this to make it worthwhile."

Noon had come and gone before they caught their first glimpse of Newt Furey's weatherbeaten shack. Around the "Medical Springs" the

sage-brush, well watered by the run-off, stood six feet high. The board cabin, with its sod roof, stood out boldly a few yards away, supporting a shed that was too weary to hold itself erect.

"Any signs of life there?" the little one asked, as Rip raised his glasses.

"Yes, there's a couple horses tethered just outside the door. Smoke curling up from the chimney."

"Then we better git ready for trouble," Grumpy ground out. "We're ridin' too close together, for one thing. Move over a little, Jim! You want to be all set to git that rifle out from under yore leg in a hurry!"

Nightwind nodded that he understood. Grumpy said no more. Tremendously alert they loped toward the house. They were soon close enough to be picked off. The lines in the little one's rocky face had deepened. Though his slitted eyes were riveted on the open door of the shack he was aware of Rip moving along at his right in a tense, tight-lipped silence. On the other side Nightwind was a tall, stiff shape in his saddle, his wide shoulders braced and square.

The four hundred yards to the door shrank to two.

"If they open up on us now they'll tear us to pieces," Jim muttered, his lips barely moving. Rip heard him.

"We'll know in a minute," he said.

CHAPTER VI

Secret of the Wastelands

THE expected blast of gunfire did not come, however. The wind rustled eerily through the brush. From the tules, that surrounded the main pool of the springs, a flock of blackbirds wheeled into the air, the rustling of their wings as loud as the booming of surf in the charged, bitter stillness.

The moment was not a new one for the partners. But it weighed on them no less heavily on that account. The horses had been quick to catch the tension of their riders. Wrinkling their muzzles, they sniffed the air apprehensively.

With a faint drumming of hoofs the three men rode into the unfenced yard then. A man came to the door and peered out at them. Nightwind wet his lips unconsciously.

"Furey," he said.

The old man stood there, pretending to look surprised and shading his eyes with his hand, as though trying to identify them.

"Oh, Jim!" he exclaimed as they pulled up at the door. "Yuh on yore way up to Jordan?"

"No, these boys want to ask you a couple questions, Newt. They're detectives. I suppose you heard that Mr. Gordon had been killed. Ripley, here, thought maybe you had seen some strangers drifting down in the direction of the opening."

"Yeh, I heard about Trig," Furey acknowledged. "Too bad! I don't recollect seein' no strangers headin' south this spring. But no harm in lightin' a while." He ran a grimy hand over his tobacco-stained beard. His ragged hair, greasy overalls and linsey shirt bore bountiful evidence that he was unacquainted with the cleansing qualities of his springs. "Big day fer me," he croaked. "Sit around twiddlin' my thumbs fer weeks, then company all comes together!"

The partners had already decided that this dirty, hawk-nosed, spindley-shanked old man was not the innocent he pretended to be. His faded eyes were cunning and vaguely treacherous.

"I noticed the horses there," Rip said to him. "We don't want to bust in on you if you're busy. We can wait."

"No, that's all right," Newt proclaimed. "Bin talkin' business with a fella; he's interested in buying the springs. Takin' some samples of the water back with him to be analyzed. We're all through; jest bin sittin' inside gassin'."

He was a plausible old liar. The partners appeared to accept his tale without question. Nightwind took his cue from them.

"Who are you doing business with, Newt?" the latter inquired.

Rip nodded, telling himself he couldn't have put a better question. Chairs scraped within, and before the old man could answer, Speed Daggett stepped into view. Slick Hanaford, Mullhall's puncher, was just behind him. Daggett had several small bottles of water in his hands.

"Furey's doing business with me," Speed answered for himself. "Any objections?"

Speed addressed his question to Nightwind, but his glance fastened on Rainbow. The latter smiled inscrutably. To have Daggett stand up as coolly as this surprised him a little.

"Taking water out of a hole in the ground and peddling it at a dollar a bottle to the suckers ought to be right up your alley, Speed," he observed lightly.

DAGGETT met the thrust with a contemptuous smile. His dark, rather handsome face and his fine clothes and expensive linen gave him a certain air of distinction. "I expect to do all right," he said, measured hostility running through his words. He turned to Furey. "Ripley and Gibbs will try to run me down to you, Newt. They thought they had something on me a couple years ago, back in Wyoming. They told Mullhall the law still had a ticket out on me." His laugh had a thin, reckless ring.

"You can think what you please about it. If the report that comes back on these samples is good, your money will be waiting, that's all you've got to worry about."

He crowded past the old man and walked to his horse. Hanaford, tough and formidable-looking, tossed a parting nod at Newt and then swaggered after Daggett. The latter went through the farce of wrapping the bottles carefully and placing them in a saddlebag. He and Hanaford swung up then and started to move away. Grumpy and Nightwind flashed a questioning glance at Rip.

"Let 'em go," the tall man murmured, adding for Furey's benefit, "It's foolish to rake up old scores. If Daggett's turned a new leaf and is shooting square, I'm willing to give him a break."

"Yeh, I reckon yo're right," Grumpy declared, understanding him perfectly. "Say, Newt, what's the chances of our gittin' a bite to eat? You got any meat?"

The old man cocked a shrewd eye at him. "I allus got meat," he declared, with a chuckle. "I kin sit here in the doorway most any mornin' and knock off an antelope or all the sage-hen I need. Game laws don't bother me none; I gotta eat. Yuh boys come in! I'll fry up sunthin'."

He disappeared inside the shack and Nightwind and the partners put their horses up at the rail. The spurious good-will behind Furey's proffered hospitality did not fool Rip or Grumpy for a second.

"There was a third man with Daggett—Kit Springer," Jim reminded them. "What do you suppose has become of him?"

"Wal, I reckon they had some Chinks here and Springer has cleared out with 'em," the little man answered. He wagged his head skeptically. "That was a tall tale you let Speed git away with, Rip! I swear he believes we swallowed it, and this old juniper, too. I'd like to have a look around this place."

"I'll go in and keep Newt busy," Nightwind offered.

Rainbow was about to say yes, when he changed his mind. "Let Grump go," he countered; "he's less likely to make a slip." That was not the real reason, and Rip knew it. If Nightwind saw any indication of lack of trust in himself, he gave no sign of it.

The shed doors stood open. There was a small dirt cellar in back of the house. The cover was propped up. It was enough for Rainbow.

"We can quit looking," he told Nightwind. "With everything inviting our inspection like this you can be sure they're left nothing here for us to see. It never occurred to Daggett that we might have used the binoculars on him. He was sure he was so far out from the butte that we

couldn't tell whether he had one man or two with him."

Rip had a word of caution for Nightwind as they approached the door. "I want to get away from here without tipping Furey off to anything, but don't freeze up when we get inside. You'll be safe if you just confine your remarks to the Gordon matter."

They stepped in to hear Newt say that he hadn't seen anyone moving south since last fall. "It's too early in the year fer cowpunchers to be driftin' across the line," he ran on, fishing dishes and tableware out of a homemade cabinet nailed to the wall. "They kin find a job any place they look till the spring brandin's over."

"The season don't hold a man back when he's tryin' to keep ahead of the law," the little one countered. "We figger it was someone who was shippin' his trunk ahead of him, as the sayin' goes, and needin' money that killed Trig Gordon." He gave the lie a ring of sincerity.

FUREY shook his head. "I wisht I could help yuh. The fact is, if a fella was on the dodge he could slip by the springs without me seein' him. This is a wide country!"

Rip took up the questioning and held the conversation where he wanted it, and as they talked, his eyes roved over the cabin, looking in vain for some evidence that Chinese were being quartered there regularly for a day or two at a time. He could see Furey in the kitchen, busy at the stove. The man seemed untroubled by their presence.

"He can't have picked up everything," Rainbow mused. "Some trifling thing would tell me what I want to know."

"Yuh kin sit up; I'll bring the stuff in," the old man called to them a few minutes later.

Rainbow took a place at the table near the cabinet and, unnoticed, slipped his fork into his pocket.

"Smells fine!" Grumpy declared hungrily.

Though the cook was dirty, the food was good—antelope steak, steamed rice, beans and coffee. Rip waited until Newt sat down with them before he started looking for a fork.

"Guess you missed me, Newt," he said. "I don't seem to have a fork. Don't bother to get up; I'll swing around and get one myself."

He turned to the cabinet, opened the door, froze the surprise out of his eyes at what he saw in the box with the knives and forks, and picked up one of the latter at random and started eating, all so casually that not a trace of suspicion blossomed in the old man's eyes.

"Everything's fine," Rainbow declared enthusiastically. "This is the first time in five years that I've tasted a piece of antelope."

Conversation flowed freely as they ate. Newt said nothing about Daggett. Rip decided that to avoid mentioning him completely was not the wisest course. When they were pushing their chairs back from the table he told the old man about the trouble they had had in Wyoming, confident that Furey was well acquainted with Speed's character.

"I'm telling you this for your own good," he said. "Keep your eye on him; he'll trick you if he can."

"I wa'n't born yestiday," Furey asserted. "If he does business with me it'll have to be cash on the barrel head."

Rainbow was anxious to get away, but in the hope of lulling the old man to greater security, he saw to it that the better part of an hour passed before they rode away.

They struck off to the south, in the direction of Sentinel Butte, and held that course until they were beyond any chance of being seen from the springs. For ten minutes the little one had been watching his tall partner. The moment they pulled up in a shallow draw, he said:

"The pussycat grin yo're wearin' needs some explainin'. That lyin' old bugger was purty cute; he didn't make any slips."

"He made at least two," Rip insisted. "He's had Chinese there right along. He had a couple there today until we flushed them out."

"How sure are you?" Nightwind asked.

"I'm sure enough. Furey made his first mistake when he sat that bowl of rice before us."

"I don't know about that," Jim objected. "Nothing uncommon to see rice on a ranch table in this country."

"I know, and it's a sticky, soggy mess when a white man cooks it. Every kernel of the rice we just had was dry and fluffy. Take it from me, Chinese hands prepared it. And it wasn't intended for us. I saw it steaming on the back of the stove. Newt knew I did, so he served it to us, thinking that was the best way of avoiding any questions about it."

"Wal!" Grumpy snorted. "That shore lets me down a peg! It may be true, but I figgered you had somethin' definite!"

"I have." The faintest suggestion of a smile touched Rainbow's mouth briefly. "When I reached into the cabinet, I was looking for more than a fork." He pulled out the one he had filched from the table and tossed it to the little man. "There were at least half a dozen sets of chop sticks in that box!"

NIGHTWIND wiped his mouth and a slow smile spread over his face. "That was nice work, Rainbow! It ought to be enough."

"It's enough for me!" Grumpy growled. He glanced at the fork a moment and hurled it out into the brush. "I never saw you palm that dang thing! I don't believe Newt ever tumbled to what you were up to."

"I hope not," Rip said. "We can pretty near figure out what happened at the shack when Daggett and the other two got there. The first thing Speed did was to hustle Springer off with the Chinese. He and Hanaford and Newt gave the place a going over then and got ready for us. Now, what did Springer do when he got out in the brush a mile or so?"

"Yo're tellin' this," Grumpy grumbled.

"I suspect he turned those poor yellow devils adrift, after pointing out Sentinel Butte to them and seeing them started in the right direction," Rainbow continued. "He certainly wouldn't run the risk of being caught with them in his company. He knew where to meet Daggett; they would have arranged that before they parted."

"If that's true, then they've joined up by now," the little man exclaimed. "But that's a long way from sayin' they've pulled out for the Openin'. It ain't reasonable to suppose they will till they know how things went between us and Newt. The thing for us to do is to play our own hand; we got what we came for, and without givin' ourselves away. My hunch is to start makin' tracks for Horsethief Crick."

"I agree with all that," Rip told him. "Suppose we follow this draw as far as it will take us and then angle off to the southwest and reach the Opening from that direction. We may be lucky enough to see something."

"Just a minute!" Grumpy growled as the tall man started to move on. "If yo're thinkin' of pickin' up them Chinks, you can forgit it! We don't want none of that!"

"You bet we don't!" was Rainbow's emphatic answer. "A glimpse of them will satisfy me. They'll have to cross this draw. See if you can't pick up their trail. We'll swing in behind you."

They moved along the draw for better than a mile. Rip and Nightwind saw the little man suddenly rein in sharply and then swing off to the right for a few yards, his attention fixed on the sand. They drew up quickly.

"Have you found it?" Rainbow demanded.

"Yeh! These Chinks drag their feet in them sandals. Purty hard to find a clean print....There's one! No heel; sandal, all right."

He got down and knelt over the tell-tale track. Minute particles of sand were slipping down over the edges of the impression. After watching them for several minutes the little man glanced up at Rip.

"They crossed here within the last

few minutes," he said. "These tracks are awful fresh!"

Rainbow's glance lifted to the southern rim of the draw. "Let's get over there," he suggested.

It took no more than ten minutes. Rip was the first one up the slope. He no sooner reached the rim than he turned back sharply.

"They're out there in the brush a few yards," he announced. "There's three of 'em. Climb out of your saddles and we'll go up and have a look. I don't want them to see us."

Crouched down in the brush they watched the three Chinese, trudging along in single file and casting frightened glances to right and left.

"Scared to death," Rip muttered. "I feel sorry for 'em! Be night before they reach the butte. Their tongues will be hanging out for a drink. Any water this side of there, Jim?"

Nightwind almost missed the question. He tore his eyes away from the Chinese. "No, not a drop between here and Sentinel Butte." He smiled apologetically. "I seem to be the only one the least bit surprised, not that I had to see this with my own eyes to believe it; I knew you were right." He shook his head over it. "I can see how Cheng might have got mixed up in it. But not Mr. Gordon. He was always a man to mind his own business. If he had known about it I don't believe it would have been any great crime in his eyes; he always had a high regard for most Chinese. I've heard him say that we ought to have more of them in the country."

"That wouldn't mean a thing to the wolves behind this game," Grumpy said flatly. "If they figgered he was dangerous—or had somethin' they wanted—they would have gone after him!"

THE spot where they stood was reasonably high. Before returning to the horses Rainbow stopped to sweep the surrounding country.

"Well, that's good!" he muttered, gazing back in the direction of the springs. "Furey's got a kite in the air!"

"A kite?" Nightwind demanded excitedly. "Whereabouts?"

Rainbow pointed it out to him and exchanged a glance with the little one.

"It's a kite, sure enough!" Jim declared soberly. "Don't get the idea that this is any kid stuff! That's a signal! Newt is sending some word to Daggett! They'll be pulling out for the butte now. If we can get there first, they'll walk right into our hands. That'll give us a chance to shake something out of them!" It was the first time the partners had seen him aroused.

"We're after bigger game than that," Rip told him. "I'm not interested in breaking up this business for the present. We'll give the butte a wide berth this time. But about the kite, Jim—where do you get the idea that's it a signal?"

"From something Cheng told me," Nightwind answered readily. "I was riding our range above the Horsethief one afternoon last fall, when I saw him scurry down into the bottoms. I yelled to him and got him up to me. He was scared. There was kite flying, off to the west in the direction of Mullhall's house. Cheng told me it was devil kite—that somebody was making talk with it. That was about all I could get out of him, but I noticed he didn't leave the yard for a week after that."

"That's interesting," said Rainbow. "Did you ever see him back in that region again?"

"Only once that I remember. I didn't think much of it till now. I believe there's something to it."

"So do I," the tall man agreed. For reasons of his own, he was not anxious to go into it any further. He told Nightwind to pick a course that would take them around the walking men and get them back to the Opening. They started at once. It was some minutes before the partners found a chance to exchange a word in private.

"I begins to appear that I was right when I said there was more to it than smugglin' some Chinks through this country," the little one declared

pointedly. "Cheng knew they was after him as long ago as last fall."

"He certainly did," Rainbow agreed. His tone was grimly sober. "There's a real lead in this, Grump! If Cheng Wah's prospecting was as profitless as we are told, it couldn't have made much difference to him where he looked for gold. But something drew him back to that spot on the Horsethief, where he knew his life was in danger!" He shook his head, frankly puzzled. "I'd give an arm to know why! Could his prospecting have been just a cover-up for something else?"

"Hunh!" the leathery-faced little man grunted triumphantly. "I've been tryin' to tell you that right along! His prospectin' was jest an excuse to git him away from the house!"

"I don't know," Rip demurred. "We'll give that canyon a good workout in the next few days. Don't try to draw Nightwind out about it. If he brings it up again, all right."

Grumpy bristled at once. "What's behind that?" he growled. "You got the idea he ain't on the up and up with us?"

"Seems rather strange to me that he didn't say anything about this last night, when we were firing questions at Miss Gordon and him," was Rainbow's frank answer.

"I don't suppose he considered it important enough to mention!" the little one flung back.

Rip nodded non-committally. "I hope that's the correct explanation," he said thinly.

CHAPTER VII

Wide Open For Trouble

THE PARTNERS spent a fruitless day searching the creek bottom along where Nightwind told them the incident with Cheng Wah had occurred. It was below the big bend of the Horsethief and better than a mile from where the creek and the road to the Opening met. That placed it well inside the Rocking Chair line.

At this point the creek had almost run out of the series of canyons through which it fought its way down from the high places in the Signals. The bottoms, choked with buckbrush and scrub willow, were not more than fifty feet wide, with the stream first on one side and then on the other, confined by gentle slopes no higher than the tips of the trees.

Cattle had made trails through the brush, but there were immense piles of tangled limbs and other debris brought down on the crest of innumerable cloudbursts and spring freshets that neither man nor beast could get through. To make their task even more difficult, the two men had no definite idea of what they were looking for. An outcropping of rock that might have interested Cheng; any suspicious-looking mound of earth that could have been a grave; a discarded piece of clothing; some sign of a cache—any one of these things, and many more, would have claimed their full attention. But they found nothing. Of one thing they were sure, however: they knew they were being watched.

The afternoon was well gone when Rip saw Grumpy whip around, his gun in his fist, intent on slapping a shot at a spot halfway up the far bank.

"I ain't crazy!" the little man growled. "There's someone over there! This crick is makin' some noise, but I heard brush crackin', and it wa'n't the first time!"

"You'd be a dead mackerel by now if it was his intention to pick you off," Rainbow told him, convinced there had been someone over there most of the afternoon. "He evidently knows what we're doing here. If we haven't been fired on it's only because we've never got close to putting our finger on anything."

"There'd be some satisfaction in smokin' the skunk out jest to see him run!" the little one burst out angrily. "We're close to the road now. I reckon when we start workin' up along it tomorrow we'll be under a gun every minute!"

They went back to their horses, willing to call it a day, and at Rip's suggestion, climbed up the north

slope. From there they could see where the Horsethief cut back in the course of a mile in one of its many turnings.

"We may be looking in the wrong place," Rainbow remarked. "Nightwind says it was right here that he saw the cook. I'm beginning to think that doesn't prove anything. Whatever there was on this creek that interested Cheng could have been located some distance from this spot. Suppose he had crawled out at that bend up there, with the idea of taking a short cut home; he would have crossed about here."

"It was yore idea that this was the place to begin lookin'," Grumpy observed, with cutting inflection.

"Yes, and that's all it is, I'm afraid." The tall man's tone was sober without being discouraged. "We'll stick with it a day or two and try to run it down."

INSTEAD of recrossing the Horsethief there, they followed it back to the house by way of the north bank. Neither had much to say as they rode along in the stillness of early evening. The problem with which the little one was struggling finally demanded expression, however. He flicked a critical glance at Rip.

"Why were you so quick to turn thumbs down on my idea that what we're lookin' for is some tins of opium? You know that a gang that'll run Chinks will smuggle in that stuff. If they had any reason to cache it, it would have been smart to plant it on Gordon's side of the crick."

"Of course it would," Rainbow agreed. "But it couldn't have been opium, and for two or three reasons. If Cheng Wah had stumbled on a cache of it, they would have killed him and then removed the stuff. It could have been done over night. But they went on to make Gordon an offer for this ranch. When he wouldn't sell, they killed him, and they've been doing their best to discourage his daughter into getting off the place. It just doesn't add up, Grump, unless you think they're anxious to get into the cattle business in a big way."

"All right! All right! You've said enough!" Grumpy protested. "I won't bring it up again! Mebbe they was jest fightin' to see who was to have the chop suey business on the Horsethief."

Rip smiled. "I was just trying to see it from their angle; we know there's brains behind that bunch, and I'm not thinking of Mullhall and Daggett. Left to themselves, their work would be pretty crude. It wouldn't take us long to get them out on the end of a limb. But Mr. Sam Lee Duck won't make many mistakes."

"You bet he won't!" the little man retorted pointedly. "All our playin' dumb with Newt Furey and Daggett won't fool him very much. He knows that what happened at Silvey's Crick told us plainly enough that Chinamen are mixed up in this business, and that we'll do somethin' about it. He didn't lose a minute about tryin' to knock us off. He's got ten times as much reason for havin' another try at it now. When I hit this crick tomorrow, my rifle stays on my arm!"

After supper they went up to the house to see Glenna. Nightwind walked over with them. She was able to tell them that she had heard from Doctor Shanks, and that he would be in Nevada City two days later.

"That's good news," said Rip. "I hope we're through on the creek by the time he gets here. We didn't have any luck today."

"We were lucky enough not to git busted wide open!" the little one observed. "We were watched all day!"

Glenna's eyes widened in alarm. "Do you mean to tell me they were inside our line watching you, Grumpy?"

"It was no more than we expected," Rainbow told her. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"But coming on top of what happened on the plateau yesterday, I think there is every reason to take it seriously!" she insisted. "I don't intend to have anyone prowling over our range, no matter what their busi-

ness is!" She turned excitedly to Nightwind. "Jim, you certainly intend to do something about it. I want you to send half a dozen men out with Rainbow and Grumpy tomorrow."

"I suggested that to them at supper," he replied. "Rip says he doesn't want it. They got close to the road today; tomorrow they'll be working up the canyon. He feels that if they are fired on it will be from Mullhall's side of the creek."

"Then I say, go after them!" Glenna declared stoutly. "If it's a case of fight back or die, I intend to fight! Buck Mullhall's fence won't stop me; I've suffered enough from that man and the nest of outlaws he's gathered around him!"

GRUMPY silently applauded her fighting spirit. Rainbow was moved, too, but he raised the same objections to her that he had given Nightwind.

"I'm willing to risk a shot for what it will tell us," he argued. "There was nothing to stop them from having a try at picking us off today. But they didn't, and I don't believe they will try it tomorrow unless we come pretty close to finding what we're after."

Glenna shook her head. "I can't ask you to take such a chance for me."

"We'll take purty good care of ourselves," Grumpy assured her. "If they start throwin' lead at us, they'll git some back, I promise you!"

Three more cows had died that day, bringing the total to over sixty. On the winter range, where the stock was being guarded, no sign of the sickness had developed. On their way north, early the following morning, the partners met Honey Niggeling and the three men who had been riding the dark to dawn trick. They reported that the night had passed without incident.

"The stuff seems to be safe enough there," was Grumpy's comment, as he and Rip continued on their way. "Jim could shift most of his herd over there if Doc Shanks can't git to the bottom of this trouble."

"That would be my suggestion," Rainbow agreed.

They took up where they had left off the previous evening and by the middle of the morning were working along the road. They had not been there thirty minutes before they were aware of watchful eyes across the creek.

The day ran on much as the previous one had, with their finding nothing of interest and the feeling that any moment might bring gunfire weighing on them and tightening their nerves. They found many places where the ledges had been chipped by a pick. The marks were old, and their limited knowledge of mining was sufficient to tell them that no "values" were to be found there.

Several times in the course of the afternoon riders appeared boldly on the western rim and gave the canyon a careful scrutiny.

"They ain't makin' any bones about keepin' cases on us now!" Grumpy snapped, when it happened for the third time. "Mullhall's crew is shore givin' this strip of range a lot of attention!"

"We're not having any luck here," Rip told him. "Suppose we start moving a little faster; I'm curious to know how far those birds will stick with us."

By five o'clock, the partners were miles north of the point where they had begun their search that morning. Across the creek the skulkers had kept pace with them. Rainbow could feel the little one's disgust and exasperation mounting by the second. It spilled over in a wrathful explosion a few minutes later.

"Good Josephine, I've had enough of this! If we're an inch from the spot where Nightwind saw that Chink, we're six miles! You know if that Cheng Wah had been that far from his secret, he wouldn't have been duckin' down into the bottoms to avoid Jim! I tell you there ain't nothin' here, or we've plumb missed it!"

"It looks like you're right," Rip admitted, with a keen sense of failure.

"Yore own argument that we'd be

fired on if we got close to anythin' proves that I'm right!" Grumpy growled. "I'll go further than that while I'm about it! Them skunks across way are laughin' up their sleeve at us! They know there's nothin' here for us to find!"

"You're making me believe it," said Rip. "We can get out of the canyon here. You go up first; I'll cover you until you reach the rim; you can do the same for me, then. I'm going to get back to the house before the men go out for the night trick."

WHEN they rode into the lower yard they found Glenna and Nightwind down at the horse corral, watching Stuffy Logan, Rocking Chair's bronc buster, having it out with a wild-eyed roan.

"What luck?" Glenna asked at once.

Rainbow shook his head. "Nothing ....Jim, have you sent the men out for the night job yet?"

"No—"

"Good! I'm going to ask you to keep them in."

They walked across the yard to the porch of Nightwind's cottage. Rip explained his surprising request.

"I know it means taking a chance," he said. "It may cost you some cows; I wouldn't ask you to leave that stuff unguarded if I knew any other way of getting the information we've got to have. The trouble you've had with the stock has been running along for three weeks now. Maybe Mullhall and his partners have had men on your range since you first noticed the sickness, and maybe they haven't; the poison they spread three weeks ago may still be doing all the damage."

Glenna was puzzled. "I'll do whatever you say, but I must admit I don't know what you're trying to prove."

"I want to find out if they're still interested in the Rocking Chair. This will tell us."

"I see," she murmured uncertainly. She appealed to Nightwind. "How do you feel about it, Jim?"

"I don't mean to be bullheaded about this," he said, "but I can't see it! The stock we moved up there is getting by all right. I believe it's only because we've been watching the stuff night and day. If I pull the men in, and this sickness starts running wild on our winter range the way it has over east on the flatlands, you know where it will put us. The fact that Rainbow and Grumpy were watched yesterday and today ought to be evidence enough that Mullhall is still gunning for us."

"That didn't have anything to do with the ranch," Rip declared with equal determination. "There's no evidence at all that a move has been made against Rocking Chair in the past two weeks or more. When you first mentioned Cheng's strange behaviour that afternoon last fall, I was convinced that one of the important answers to this case would be found on the creek. I'm still of that opinion; I know there is, or was, something there. If it's been removed, then that gang has no further interest in this ranch. That's the information I'm really after, and I know what I'm suggesting will give it to us."

Glenna took matters into her own hands. "If you feel it is as important as that, Rainbow, Jim will see to it that the men do not go out tonight."

Late the following afternoon Rip had the answer he wanted. With Nightwind, he and Grumpy rode Rocking Chair's winter range. They found two dead yearlings and saw death claim a third. Nightwind didn't pretend to conceal what he thought about it.

"You've learned what you wanted to know," he said thinly, "but it's a stiff price to pay for it! The harm's been done now and there'll be more and more of these white-faces stretched out around here from day to day!"

"Shanks will be here tomorrow," Rip answered, recognizing the justice of the foreman's complaint. "I don't expect him to perform any miracles, but I'll see that he stays with us until we know what to do about this."

"I hope he'll be able to tell us," Jim muttered grimly. "I can't take

any more of this. I'm turning the whole crew out tonight."

"I'm afraid you'll be too late, Jim," the little one declared sympathetically. "Those skunks have done their dirty work."

"For whatever it gets us, the men are going out tonight, and I'm riding with them! If we catch anyone on this range, he'll be a dead man in a hurry!

CHAPTER VIII

The Mystery of the Dead Cows

NIGHTWIND and the men went out at dark. It was long after midnight when the partners heard him come in. Rainbow called him into the bedroom.

"We gave that country a good whipping out," Jim told them. "Just before I came in, we crossed the Horsethief and swung up into mountains for a mile or so. No luck! I've got a few men posted along the bottoms. They'll stay there till daylight."

At breakfast, the story was the same; the men who had spent the night on the creek had not caught sight of anyone.

It was noon-time before Shep Rockingham returned from Nevada City with Dr. Shanks, a thin, wiry man, who listened with deep interest to what Glenna and Nightwind had to say. He turned to the partners then.

"Well, what have you boys got to tell me?" he inquired. "I've always found your observations shrewd and to the point, Rainbow."

"There's nothing I can add to what you've just heard," the tall man replied. "Let me fire a question or two at you, Doctor. Miss Gordon has had a vet out here three or four times. He's examined the droppings and saliva of the sick cows. He says it's arsenic."

"The symptoms indicate it," the scientist cut in.

"Then is there any way a solution of arsenic could have been used to poison the grass?"

"In spots, yes! But it would be much easier to spread crystals of white arsenic. It would take tons of it, however, to do any widespread damage. In view of the size of the area that appears to be contaminated, I can't believe that any form of commercial arsenic is being used. I think it equally incredible that some unknown species of noxious weed has suddenly appeared in this section of Nevada, with such deadly results."

"That seems to rule out the two most probable causes we have arrived at," Rip said. "This country is highly mineralized. I understand arsenic is found in combination with silver, sulphur and many other minerals. Would it be possible for it to work up through the soil in sufficient quantities to kill stock?"

Doctor Shanks pushed his chair back from the dinner table, a wry smile on his thin face. "I can give you only a left-handed answer to that," he declared. "Under certain conditions, I suppose some soluble compound could reach the surface. To my knowledge there's no certified case of it ever having occurred. Near Leadville, Colorado, some years ago, that theory was advanced to explain the mysterious death of livestock in a coulee where cattle had been grazed for a long time. The grass was good there, and the stock had always done well. One spring, they began dying. It happened two or three years running. Cowmen claimed it was something that had worked up through the soil. They kept their cows away from it, then, and let it go back to brush. Nothing was ever proven scientifically. Fire swept that country several times, and that seemed to cure the trouble. Professor Donalson, of the University of Colorado, and I visited the spot a few years back; we failed to find any trace of arsenic or any of its compounds....What have you done with the carcasses of the cows that died yesterday, Mr. Nightwind?"

"I had them buried. I thought that was the safest thing to do."

"Cremation would have been better. But that's all right. If you'll give me a few minutes I'll get into my field clothes and we can start out. I'll take a microscope and a few

things along. This evening we can set up a little laboratory in one of your unused sheds. I've brought everything with me that I'll need to make the *Reinch's test.* It's tedious, but I've found it the most satisfactory."

AT HIS request they went directly to the scene of the latest outbreak of the mystifying sickness.

"They died here, within a few yards of each other, Doctor," Rainbow told him. "That doesn't say they weren't sick when they reached this spot; they may have been heading toward the creek for water."

"If it's arsenic, they wouldn't have been looking for water; the stomach couldn't retain it. In acute poisoning the interval between taking the arsenic into the stomach and the beginning of the symptoms rarely ranges beyond ten to thirty minutes. You can depend on it that those cows died within a few yards of where they were stricken. This is good clean range here; I think we can dismiss the possibility that any form of plant life is in any way responsible for what had happened. I want you to get down on your hands and knees with me and scrutinize the grass carefully. Arsenic crystals are a steel gray. If it's white, arsenious acid, you'll find traces of white, flour-like powder. If you see anything, call me before you touch it."

For half an hour the three men crawled over the grass. They failed to find the slightest evidence that any foreign substance had been sprinkled on it. Shanks was frankly disappointed.

"The mystery deepens," he said. "I can't understand it. I didn't say anything when I noticed that one of your salt blocks for the stock had been placed here, Nightwind; but it led me to believe we wouldn't have to look far for the answer to your trouble." He smiled apologetically at Rip and the little one. "I guess I better leave the detective work to you boys."

"What do you mean, Doc?" Grumpy asked.

"Well, if I wanted to go on a man's range and poison his stock, I'd certainly spread my bait around his salt blocks, knowing the cattle would come to them. Then, too, salt activates arsenic with deadly effect. Suppose we go on to another block and look there."

"We'll find several between here and the creek if we swing off to the east a little," Nightwind told him. "I think you've hit the nail on the head, Doctor. As I recall it, it's always been around the salt blocks that the stuff has died."

Riding along, an idea began to take shape in Rip's mind. He did not mention it, but when they reached the next block and found a young bull standing there, vomiting, its legs stiff with cramps, he was further convinced that what he was thinking might hold the solution to the mystifying problem.

"That bull won't last long," Shanks declared. "I'll make an autopsy as soon as it dies."

"One after another they go!" Nightwind ground out bitterly. "They aren't any safer in here now than out on the flat!" His tone was accusing. Rip felt it and silently accepted his responsibility.

The animal collapsed within ten minutes. A hurried microscopic examination of bits of its liver definitely established that arsenic was the poisoning agent.

"Doctor, you'll be busy for sometime," said Rainbow. "Grump and I are going to leave you here with Nightwind and swing off down the creek for a mile or two. Where will we find your main herd, Jim?"

"Working up toward those low hills you see off there to the east. If you're going that far you may run into Honey and some of the boys. They're branding calves in there today. Better let them know who you are, or they might open up on you."

"We'll do that," Rip said, as he and Grumpy started to move away.

THEY soon lost sight of Jim and the doctor.

"We're movin' in purty close to that scrub for not knowin' what's there," the little man observed cau-

tiously, when they were within a hundred yards of the Horsethief. "You can take it for granted that it was through here that them skunks ran in their poison, night before last!"

Just to the north of the creek the mountains pinched up suddenly, the irregular slope dotted with dense stands of mahogany brush and patches of aspen. Using them for cover, a man could steal down out of the Signals, cross the Horsethief, and reach the heart of Rocking Chair's best range with little fear of detection.

"Beautiful and wild in through there," Rainbow remarked, swinging off to the south a bit. "I wasn't interested in crossing the creek, but I thought if we stayed in rather close until we got through these hills we'd save time."

The little one nodded, his vigilance unrelaxed. The hills proved to be no barrier, and they had no sooner broken through them than they saw the branding crew. The men saw them at almost the same moment. They rushed to their horses at once. A few minutes later the partners found themselves facing Honey and four others. Niggeling grinned sheepishly at discovering his mistake.

"With things the way they are, we couldn't afford to take a chance," he declared pointedly. "Yo're dang lucky we didn't start blazin' away at yuh!"

"It's all right, Honey," Rip assured him. "Jim told us we'd find you in here. Any more stuff down today?"

"I didn't see any, but Malone, says he spotted a critter that had folded up about noon." Honey turned to the gaunt, red-haired man at his side for confirmation. "That right, Melody?"

"Yeh, I heard a calf bawlin' in the brush over there in the bend where yuh see the break in the willers," Melody explained. "I went after it. The calf was all right, but his mammy was jest about dead."

"Is there a salt block in there?" Rip inquired.

"Yeh! I can ride over there with yuh if yuh want."

"Much obliged, but you don't have to bother," Rainbow protested. "We'll just swing over to the creek and head back." He raised his hand and said "So long!"

The men returned to their work.

"I don't know what's on yore mind," Grumpy complained. "Lookin' at some more dead cows ain't goin' to tell us anythin'."

"Finding them dead around these salt blocks is telling me plenty," Rip returned. "Near the break in the trees, Malone told us. Do you see anything?"

"Yeh, there's a block in there. I don't see the cow."

"I don't care about the cow. You wait here a minute!"

Rainbow rode up to the familiar-looking block of compressed salt, and got down. With his knife, he started to break off a piece of the block. As he struck downward with the blade a rifle coughed murderously in the brush ahead of him.

The slug whined past his head close enough to whip his hat away. Before he could throw himself back from the block, a second shot split it to fragments. Hugging the earth, he jerked his gun out of the holster.

"Stay down!" Grumpy shrieked at him.

Twenty yards away the little one raced past him for the opening in the willows. His rifle at his shoulder, and he was firing with deliberate aim.

RIP heard a horse break out of the creek bottom. Raising himself on an elbow, he had a brief glimpse of a rider dashing through the break and turning up the far side of the creek. In the second before he disappeared, Grumpy pumped a shot into him. The man's rifle went flying, and he seemed about to tumble to the ground. But he caught his saddle horn and hung on.

By the time Rainbow swung up and got across the Horsethief, the little one was five hundred yards ahead of him, and still riding reck-

lessly. Nothing could be seen of the fleeing gunman.

Rip took up the chase. He realized quickly that it was moving away from the creek and toward the great patches of mountain mahogany, higher than a mounted man's head, that ran up the slope of the Signals. He lost sight of Grumpy presently. A few minutes later the little one's rifle cracked sharply. Rip turned to the left, in the direction from which the shot had sounded.

"Grump!" he yelled. "Did you fetch him?"

"Good Josephine, no!" the little man screeched wrathful. "Git over here, Rip!"

He found Grumpy standing up in his stirrups, watching the patches of brush ahead of him with a piercing squint.

"What happened?" Rip demanded.

"I lost the miserable rat! I don't know whether he turned right or left! I know he's bad hurt! You all right?"

"Yeh! Did you get a good enough look at this man to know him again?"

Grumpy nodded fiercely. "I'd know him, all right!" He wheeled his horse around suddenly. "Here comes Honey and the rest! We'll fan out now and run this gent down!"

But an hour's diligent searching failed to reward them with anything beyond scattered bloodstains on the brush. Rainbow called Grumpy and the others in.

"Looks like he got away," he told them. "He evidently knew where he was going."

"Into Orphan Canyon and over the hills to the Openin," Melody Malone asserted. "He pulled that neat trick by turnin' back to the crick when yuh figgered he was all out to climb the slope."

"I reckon that's what happened," Honey agreed. "He ain't between us and the Horsethief now."

There was nothing to do but turn back.

"No need to feel down about this," Rip said. "At least, we know what's been killing the stock. We can stop that in a hurry."

"Wal?" Grumpy questioned, as puzzled as the rest.

"Why, the salt blocks! When that bird saw me trying to chip off a piece, he knew the secret was out. That's why he tried to kill me. Those blocks are loaded with arsenic!"

Melody shook his head. "I don't see how that can be," he said flatly. "Honey and me put out these blocks along the crick."

"You're mistaken, Melody," Rainbow declared confidently. "You'll find the blocks you set out are not the ones that are there today!"

CHAPTER IX

The Sheriff Comes Riding

RAINBOW and Grumpy were the first to reach the house with news of what had occurred along the creek. Nightwind came out on the gallery and hailed them as they passed.

"Doctor Shanks and I got in an hour ago," he said. "We were beginning to wonder what had become of you. Glenna wants you to come in to supper. We were just about to sit down."

"We'll go in with you, but supper will have to wait," Rip told him, swinging into the rail. The crispness of his tone told Nightwind that something important had happened.

"Did you boys run into trouble?" he asked quickly.

"Plenty of it!" the tall man answered. "Suppose I tell it to the three of you; it'll save time."

Glenna caught the excitement the partners brought into the dining room. Nightwind's tense face quickened her alarm.

"Is it bad news, Jim?" she asked, with a sharp intake of breath.

"Quite the contrary, Miss Gordon," Rip answered for himself. He pulled out a piece of the shattered salt block. "This is what has been killing your cows! I got that idea this afternoon. It took a rifle slug to prove it to me."

He gave them a full account of what had happened.

"Thank heaven, we know at last!"

Glenna exclaimed, her voice tremulous with relief. "And what good fortune that you weren't even scratched, Rainbow!" She turned to Nightwind. "You can send out a wagon tonight and pick up the blocks."

"Of course! But I don't see how it can be the blocks. We got them from the Nevada City Mercantile; They've been selling the same kind to us for years."

"Somebody changed them on you, Jim," Grumpy spoke up. "You can prove that by comparin' one with what you've got in the barn. Yore microscope will show that, won't it, Doc?"

"I think so," Doctor Shanks murmured, busily engaged in examining the chunk of salt Rainbow had handed him. "A test with a piece of copper and some hydrochloric acid will do even better." He glanced at Glenna. "If you'll excuse me, Miss Gordon, I'll see what I can find. It shouldn't take me over half an hour."

An unused shed next to the blacksmith shop had been placed at his disposal. Nothing had been done about arranging it for his use, however.

"I'll go down with you, Doctor," Nightwind offered. "You'll need a table and light."

"I'll tag along," Grumpy muttered. He had caught Rip's glance and interpreted it correctly.

The latter got up as the three men hurried out.

"Please have your supper!" Glenna urged. "I'll have Hilda try to keep things warm for the others. If you want to freshen up a bit, you'll find things in the room at the end of the hall."

Rainbow thanked her. When he returned to the dining room his supper was on the table.

"I'm so glad I had the courage to do as you advised," Glenna told him. "And it did take courage—with things going from bad to worse."

"I know without waiting to hear what the doctor finds that you won't have any more poisoned cattle to worry about," said Rip. "I wish I could tell you that it meant the end of all your troubles. I think it is reasonable to suppose that the men who want the Rocking Chair will try something else now. I want you to be more careful than ever. I've seen enough of Honey and Melody to know they're good men; I'd like to feel that when you leave the house that one or both of them are with you."

GLENNA was slow in answering. "I felt relieved for a moment, but that seems to have been a mistake. You sound so serious—"

"I mean to be serious," Rainbow declared soberly. "What happened this afternoon cleared up two or three things in my mind. I know those men are still after this ranch. There's something on it they want; it's still here, and they are determined to have it. As I've told you before, I don't pretend to know what it is."

"But if it's so priceless to them, why haven't they taken it? They must have had opportunities. Or can it be something they are unable to remove?"

"I doubt it! I'd much sooner believe they are convinced it is safe where it is—that we can't possibly find it. Rather than attempt to take it and risk being caught, they prefer to leave it where it is."

Glenna toyed unconsciously with her empty cup for a moment. "It's incredible to me that Cheng could have had a secret as dangerous as this—costing his life and Father's," she murmured. "Do you still feel that it has any connection with the Chinese who are being smuggled in across the plateau?"

"My hard-headed partner insists that it hasn't." Rip smiled in his tight-lipped way. "I'm beginning to agree with him. But not entirely. I know this gang was organized for the purpose of running aliens; it's the business that holds them together and supplies the money for their other activities."

"Haven't you evidence enough to break it up?"

"Yes, but we want that bunch for

murder. You wouldn't settle for anything less, would you?"

"Never!" Glenna exclaimed emphatically. "No matter how long it takes, I'll insist on that!"

They heard Doctor Shanks and the others on the gallery. The doctor's manner indicated that the test had confirmed Ripley's contention.

"There's been enough white arsenic introduced into the salt to make it deadly poisonous!" he declared. "I tested samples of the blocks that are stored in the barn. They are perfectly all right!"

Nightwind was so aroused he could not contain his anger. "It was a fiendish trick!" he burst out. "We know it was Mullhall. I'd like to use a gun on the dirty rat!"

"We know it, but we can't prove it," Rip told him. "This thing will keep. If I thought anything was to be gained by forcing a showdown with Mullhall at this time, I'd be quick to suggest it."

He did not intend it as a rebuke. Jim took it that way, however. "I'm not trying to cross you," he got out stiffly. "You outguessed me the other night when you had me call the men in. I was against it. But you were right. I presume you're right about this, too. On the other hand, it's my job to hold this outfit together. There's a limit to what I can take from Mullhall. I can't sit back and wait for him to come at the ranch again. I'm sending a couple men up into the Signals to watch the trail that comes in from the Opening. I propose to keep them there just as long as I think there's any danger from that direction. If anybody tries to get through them, they'll do the shooting and leave it to someone else to ask the questions!"

It was a forthright statement, and it had a ring that Rainbow liked. "You're certainly justified in taking that step," said he. "I'm for anything you can do to protect Rocking Chair."

NIGHTWIND left as soon as he had finished his supper. The partners sat out on the gallery with Glenna and the doctor for a while before they walked down to the cottage. They were no sooner alone than the little man began to bristle.

"Why did you pitch into Jim like that?" he demanded hotly. "That boy is a hundred per cent all right!"

"I'm surer of it tonight than I ever was," Rainbow answered frankly. "But I don't want him to go on the prod and upset the apple-cart for us before we get our foot in the door."

"Does that mean we're going back to rootin' around Horsethief Canyon?"

"No, I'm going to take Mullhall's word for it that we can't find anything there. Give them a little rope and they may lead us to it. The fat man's on my mind. I imagine he's too smart to risk being seen visiting Buck at the ranch. When they get together it's undoubtedly in Nevada City's Chinese quarter. I don't believe we could do better than to move into town for a few days and pay Mr. Sam Lee Duck a visit."

He changed his plans in the morning, for when he and Grumpy went in to breakfast, they found Marsh Burling there. The sheriff jerked an unfriendly nod at them and continued to direct his conversation to the other men at the table. The crew was completely taken in by this show of thinly veiled hostility. In the course of his remarks Marsh announced that he was riding up to the Opening. His eyes strayed toward Rainbow. The latter nodded that he understood.

Nightwind sat through it, a tense, embarrassed look on his young face. When the sheriff left, the foreman walked out with the partners.

"I'm sorry," he told them. "I suppose it's about what you could expect from the surly old fool—trying to ignore you like that."

"Forget it," Rip said carelessly. "We'll see to it that he doesn't get in our way. Has the doctor decided what he's going to do about going back?"

"Yes, I'm driving him in this morning. He's convinced we have no further need of his services."

"I think that's true," Rip agreed.

"We'll go up to the house and say good-bye to him."

Thirty minutes later he and the little one saddled up and rode north, their announced intention being to spend the day in Horsethief Canyon.

"Don't take nothin' for granted with this man Burling," Grumpy warned, as they left the house behind.

"I'm not simple enough to do otherwise," Rip replied. "You keep your eyes peeled, and I'll do the same."

They expected that Marsh would draw them a long way up the Horsethief before they caught sight of him, but as they were passing the spot where Nightwind had seen Cheng Wah, a low whistle reached them, and they saw the sheriff sitting his horse, back in the brush.

"I put the frost on you pretty heavy at breakfast," he said, as they pulled in. "I thought it was the thing to do." He gave them a hard scrutiny. "What were you boys looking for along here the other day?"

The question, unexpected straightened Rip up. "Where do you get your information?" he asked, wondering if Burling had not tripped himself already. But old Marsh laughed.

"I watched you all afternoon."

Grumpy glared at him fiercely. "So that was you over there, eh?"

"Yeh, and I kept you in sight most of the next day. I'd spent the night at Mulihall's place. When I noticed the attention his gunslingers was givin' the creek, I hung around, thinking you might need a little help if you got jumped." His eyes puckered up under their hooded brows "If it's still a fair question, what were you after?"

"We were looking for the secret to these murders," Rip told him. "That's about as definite an answer as I can give you. I'm sure Mullhall could do better."

"I don't doubt it," Burling muttered laconically. He pursed his lips thoughtfully and communed with himself for a moment. "I don't blame you boys for not opening up to me. You're still asking yourselves where I stand. . . Come on, let's be frank about it."

"As the saying goes, we're from Missouri," said Rainbow. "We're waiting for you to put your cards on the table."

"Fair enough! Would it interest you to know that Buck Mullhall has a dead man on his hands this morning?"

RIP smiled inscrutably and Grumpy looked on with a wooden expression on his grizzled face.

"It would interest us plenty if he were the right man," the former observed.

"This fellow had a rifle slug between his shoulder-blades. He ran into it some time late yesterday afternoon." Marsh Burling's eyes were as blank as Rainbow's. "It's the first time I ever knew a man to shoot himself in the back."

"That is rather amusing," Rip agreed. "Have you seen the man?"

"No, I'm not supposed to know anything about it. Slick Hanaford arrived in town last evening for Doc Nesbit. His story was that one of the crew had accidentally shot himself. Doc went out to the ranch. He couldn't do anything. He saw the wound. No powder marks, though they gave him a song and dance about a dog knocking down a rifle that was leaning against the bunkhouse wall just in back of where this gent was sitting. Doc pretended to believe that yarn, though he knew the man wouldn't have bled to death that quickly if he had just been picked up and carried inside to his bunk. I gather that he came a long way with that slug inside of him."

"What was his name?" the tall man inquired bluntly.

"Kit Springer."

The partners recalled the name. Springer had been with Daggett and Hanaford that day at Newt Furey's shack.

"Was he a little fella?" Grumpy's question was casual enough, but it failed to deceive Burling. Marsh nodded to himself.

"About your size," he answered,

with a shrewd smile. "I surmised that you boys knew considerable about it."

"We can tell you the rest," said Rip, his confidence in Burling's integrity on the upswing. "I'd like to put a question to you first. You knew that Mullhall tried to buy the Gordon outfit. Whose money was he going to use?"

"Not his own, Ripley. Buck ain't up in those figures yet. He couldn't have been looking to Daggett for it. Maybe the old pirate he rents from in town might have offered to make him a loan. Fat Sam's got the money."

It gave the partners a little jab of surprise.

"Fat Sam?" Rainbow queried.

"Sam Lee Duck, the boss of Chinatown," Marsh explained.

"He and Mullhall are friendly, are they?"

"I don't know how friendly they are, but they seem to get along all right. Fat Sam makes it his business to get along with white men, though there's not a Chink in Nevada City who ain't scared to death of him. Are you interested in him at all?"

"Considerably, Burling. When Nightwind was driving us out to the Rocking Chair the evening we arrived, a Chinese tried to bushwhack us at Silvey's Creek. You couldn't make me believe a white man hired him to do the job."

The sheriff took it phlegmatically. "What happened to the Chinaman?"

"He was killed. The body was taken away during the night. We started in the next morning to make a report to you. When we stopped at the creek we found there was nothing there. Without a corpus delecti—"

"That part's all right," Marsh got out gruffly. "The less said about it, the better. It's unusual for a Chinaman to go gunning for white men. Fat Sam may know something about it. But you boys had just hit town. What could he have had against you?"

"Maybe he was trying to do one of his friends a favor. Mullhall and Daggett knew what we were doing in Nevada City."

"I wonder," Burling muttered. He puzzled over it for a moment or two. "The trouble with that argument is that the favor that was owing was the other way around. When Buck opened the Lucky Boy it was Sam Lee Duck who backed him."

It came as no surprise to the partners.

"I suppose he put Mullhall on the ranch," Rip suggested.

"I guess he did," Marsh acknowledged. "Buck's always made money for him."

Grumpy let out a sarcastic snort. "I'll bet he has!"

CHAPTER X

Deadline of Danger

RAINBOW had gone as far as he cared to in regard to the fat man. Arbitrarily turning the conversation back to the subject of the poisoned salt blocks and the shooting on the previous evening, he said:—

"I want you to consider what I'm going to say in connection with these facts, Sheriff. You're familiar with them; you know Mullhall tried to buy Rocking Chair. He didn't get anywhere. A few days later Trig Gordon was slain. It left a young, inexperienced girl with a big ranch on her hands. Mullhall's gang figured it was better than an even bet that she'd be glad to sell it. When she crossed them up by announcing her intention to go on with the spread, they tried to whip her into line by poisoning her cattle. They picked up the salt blocks Nightwind had set out and planted a bunch of their own that they had spiked with arsenic."

He gave Marsh the whole story. The big man sat there, grim and formidable, saying nothing at the end but doing his own thinking. "That's all right, as far as it goes," he said, at last. "Your evidence is largely circumstantial but it's strong enough to pin this poisoning job on Buck."

"That's not what I'm after!" Rip asserted.

"Of course it ain't! I'm willing to believe there's something on this ranch that that gang wants. But that doesn't get you anywhere if you can't name it. You know without my telling you that you're not going to convict anyone of murder till you can produce a motive."

The partners could muster no argument against that appraisal of the situation. Certain facts were in their possession that they had not communicated to Marsh, but they knew he had hit the nail on the head. Rainbow didn't hesitate to admit it.

"Crooks give their secrets away when their patience wears thin," he said. "I know the thing this bunch is after is still here. When they find that Glenna Gordon can't be discouraged into selling out, they'll come after it."

Burling pulled at his mustache thoughtfully. When he spoke it was seemingly to turn the conversation far afield from the subject they were discussing. "Have you ever seen a Mexican crushing ore in an *arrastre?*"

"Sure, many times!" Grumpy answered. "I've heard 'em claim they was usin' the *arrastre,* when all they was doin' was spreadin' their ore out on a bed of natural rock and crushin' it by hookin' a mule to a slab of hard quartz and draggin' it around the rock bed. That ain't the real thing." He fixed the sheriff with a glance. "Why do you bring it up?"

"Only because I'm wondering if something I stumbled across on Mullhall's high range the other day could have any connection with what we are talking about. It looked to me like they had begun to build an *arrastre* up there. The bottom pan of rock is all there, and it's been carefully set. Room has been left in the center for a post. The few times I've seen that kind of milling being done, a revolving beam was always attached to a center post and mules harnessed to it and driven around and around."

"That's right," Rip agreed, not trying to conceal his interest. "It's never been used?"

"No, it's not finished. I'd swear, though, that what work has been done on it has been done this spring. A little stream comes down out of the Signals right there where the water could be led in to flow over it. I'm no authority on that sort of a contrivance; it could be something entirely different from what I think it is. But if I am right, tell me what Buck is building a thing like that for. He had Quinn River Bill and another man out on a grubstake last summer. They filed a claim or two, but that was the end of it. Where's the ore going to come from that he's planning to mill?—still saying I'm right about this."

THE question pointed up possibilities that Rainbow found irresistible. "Can you show us this thing, Burling?"

"Naturally! But if I go in there with the two of you, and we're seen, it'll tip my hand. I figure I can be a lot more use to you if we can keep up the bluff that I don't want any part of you. I can tell you the best way to get there. But I don't advise you boys to try it; you know what you'll be running into if you're spotted."

Grumpy scowled, knowing Rip's decision was already taken. He was not surprised to hear him asking Marsh for the directions. The sheriff left them there, and they proceeded up the canyon alone.

"He says to go through the Opening for a mile, and then turn back and come in by the west portal," Rainbow pointed out. We'll swing hard to the right then and keep to the hills."

"Chances are they'll bury us in them hills!" the little one snapped out furiously. "If I ever saw a double-cross set up, with a couple suckers ridin' into a jackpot, this is it!"

"We've got our eyes open," the tall man answered, quite unperturbed. "If we run into trouble we'll try to make the best of it. I happen to think Burling is on the level. This will prove whether he is or not."

"And a lot of good that'll do us if we git cut down!"

Rainbow let him grumble as they rode along. He knew that very little would escape Grumpy when he was in that mood.

Several times they thought they were being spied on from across the creek. But they left the canyon behind and struck through the Opening without difficulty. Moving out toward Sentinel Butte, as though they were going on across the plateau, they proceeded only far enough to be sure they could not be seen from the low ridge that guarded Mullhall's range. Swinging far to the left, then, they reached the west wall, skirted the ridge for a quarter of a mile, and then moved up into the first fold of the hills and the scrub timber.

"The first little stream we come to will be the one," said Rainbow.

The little man nodded, his roving eyes never still. He whipped up his gun several minutes later, but it was only a deer breaking through the brush ahead of them. The sound of its flight died away in the distance and a stillness broken only by the creaking of their saddle leather returned to the hills.

Moving slowly and carefully, thirty minutes passed before the murmur of flowing water reached them. At the bottom of a brush-choked glen they found the tiny creek Burling had described. They had not followed it more than two hundred yards, when it described almost a half-circle to get around a small, rocky flat. Save for a narrow opening, where the tiny stream broke through to the southeast, the hills threw a protecting screen about this natural cup.

"Hold up!" Rip cautioned. "This ought to be it. We'll hang back here in the trees and have our look with the glasses."

"We don't need 'em!" Grumpy returned. "I can see where they been workin' out there! Burling wasn't lyin' to us about this end of it!"

Rainbow studied the unfinished *arrastre* and the surrounding hillside for ten minutes before he handed the binoculars to his partner.

"It's certainly a small *arrastre*, Grump! And not slapped together, either. Two days' work would finish it." He shook his head in silent argument with himself. "Neither of us would have it that Cheng Wah's secret was a gold mine, but it begins to look as though we'll have to change our minds about that."

"Yeh!" the little one grunted, continuing to peer at the slightly concave rock base of the *arrastre*. "They're figgerin' on workin' high-grade ore, Rip! They've chipped out little channels on the face of them rocks. You know what this means? What gold they can't wash out with water is goin' to be picked up with quicksilver. We saw that done down in Sonora."

"WE CAN do our talking later," Rainbow advised. "We'll get out of here now."

They had put the little stream far behind and were moving along the low ridge that would take them to the Opening, when their luck ran out. They had carefully avoided the ridge on their way in, but having convinced themselves that one course was no less dangerous than the other, they had turned to the crest on the chance that they might see what went on behind Mullhall's line. The stunted cedars that dotted the ridge thinned out, and a long, narrow mountain meadow opened before them. They were half-way across when three riders charged at them from the rear. A moment later, four others dashed out of the fringe of cedars at the far end of the meadow.

"It's too late to run!" Grumpy growled. "That damned badge-toter framed us after all!"

"Just sit tight!" Rip advised. "This bunch knows we'll take at least a couple of them along with us if they try to wash us out with gun-play!"

"Mullhall and Daggett—both of 'em here!" the little one snarled. "This thing was fixed up right!"

Rainbow shook off all thought of Marsh Burling as the seven men closed in on them in a tight circle. Mullhall came pounding up, murderous rage whipping through him.

"This is as far as you gents are

goin'!" he cried. "Biff, you and Hanaford get their guns!"

"That'll be expensive, Buck," Rip observed thinly. "We've had some experience along this line; before anybody takes our guns we'll make it necessary for Fat Sam to get himself a new partner. He might consider it a favor."

This last was pure surmise. Connecting Mullhall with Sam Lee was enough to shake him, but to insinuate that the relationship had struck a dangerous snag literally rocked the man. Being true, he refused to believe that Ripley was just shooting in the dark. For days, he had been harboring the suspicion that Daggett was trying to undermine him. He flashed a hostile glance at Speed. The expression on the latter's face was stony and contemptuous. It was not any help to Buck.

Hanaford and Biff Darnell left the circle and pressed in toward the pastures a few feet and then hesitated.

"Do as I told you!" Mullhall roared at them. "I'll show these snoopin' pups they can't stick their nose on my range!"

The two men were still in no hurry to carry out his order. Grumpy continued to regard them with an icy intentness. Though he and Rip were holding their own for the moment, he knew they would not be able to talk themselves out of this jam.

"Sounds like you had something here to hide, Buck," Rainbow observed with exasperating nonchalance.

"What I've got here is my business!" was the defiant answer. "I warned you that it wouldn't be healthy for you in this country, and I'll prove it to you!"

"Stop the palaverin', Buck!" Quinn River Bill growled. "If we've got to stop this pair we'll never find a better place for it! To hell with takin' their guns! Jest give the word and we'll open up on 'em!"

"You're right, Bill! This has gone far enough!" Mullhall's glance ran over his men. "When I—" He checked himself abruptly as he saw a horseman top the ridge and hurry toward them. "Hellsfire!" he snarled disgustedly. "It's Burling! Why'd that damned old fool have to show up just now?"

Daggett's shoulders lifted cynically. "Suppose you answer that one yourself; you're running things."

How much the sheriff's presence changed the situation remained a question in the partners' minds. Marsh glared at them as he came up, and then directed his attention to Mullhall.

"What's wrong, Buck? These men making you some trouble?"

"We caught 'em snoopin' around in here! I'll be damned if I'll have it, Marsh! This is private property; they ain't got no right on it! We was just getting ready to throw 'em off—"

"I'LL take that job off your hands!" Burling declared angrily. He turned to Rip and Grumpy. "I told you gents not to overstep yourselves. You may be private detectives, but that don't give you the right to invade a man's ranch. If you wanted anything here, why didn't you take the road and go to the house?"

Rainbow gave him the sort of answer he believed the man wanted. "That may be your way of solving a case, Burling, but it isn't ours. You can call it trespassing if you care to. I know if Mullhall didn't have something to hide, he wouldn't be so wrathy."

"That's your opinion!" Marsh retorted. "Have you got any evidence to back it up?"

"No—"

"Well, then, you get your horses turned around and head for the ridge! I'll be right behind you all the way to the road! If you ever catch them in here again, Buck, I advise you to swear out a warrant against them. It'll be a pleasure to serve it. . . Get moving!" He gestured toward the ridge with his gun, and the partners pointed their mounts in that direction.

The wonder to Rainbow was that Mullhall let them go. A shot in the back wouldn't have surprised him. But they got over the ridge and

reached the road without incident. Burling ordered them to halt.

"That was a close shave," he said, as he came up. "I didn't know whether I could get away with it or not."

"You saved our bacon!" Grumpy declared, a wide grin spreading over his leathery face. "I reckon it's up to me to admit I had you all wrong. I shore had you down for a double-crossin' snake."

Marsh chuckled. "I gathered as much. No hard feelings, Grumpy. The three of us will crack this thing before we're through. But don't take no chance like that again!"

He asked about the *arrastre.*

"You were right about it," Rainbow told him. "It took time and money to put it together as carefully as that. Buck wouldn't have gone ahead with it unless he knew where the ore was coming from."

They spoke only for a minute or two, suspecting they were being watched.

"We'll part company here," Marsh advised. "You boys go down the canyon alone. If I want to get in touch with you, I'll find a way."

When they reached the bottom of the slope, they paused to let their horses drink. Grumpy was ready with a question.

"Shouldn't we have told Marsh what we know about Fat Sam's business? You as good as told Mullhall."

"I had to needle Buck with something in a hurry when he stopped us. We can tell Burling the next time we meet."

Rainbow got down to quench his own thirst.

"Did you notice how that crack of mine about Sam Lee Duck being interested in getting through with him got to Mullhall?" the tall man queried.

Grumpy nodded. "It hit a sore spot. Him and Daggett ain't any too friendly, either. What do you suppose the rub is?"

"It may be what I told Burling this morning. Crooks have very little patience. I'd expect the fat man to be an exception. It well could be that he insists on leaving things as they are a while longer, and that Mullhall wants to start using his *arrastre.* Daggett will certainly side with Fat Sam, hoping to step into Buck's shoes if a scrap develops."

Rip had got his drink and climbed back in the saddle, when he and the little one caught the unmistakable tattoo of thudding hoofs. They exchanged an apprehensive glance.

"Whoever this is, he's runnin' his hoss purty hard," Grumpy muttered. He gave his gun-belt a perfunctory hitch, just to be sure it was there, and moved in off the road another foot or two. Rip followed.

"This may be someone looking for the sheriff, Grump. We'll tell him where we left Burling, and that's all."

They caught sight of the rider before he saw them.

"Hunh!" Grumpy jerked out in surprise. "It's Shep Rockingham! He must be here for us!"

They pulled into the road and hailed him.

"Miss Gordon wants you to come to the house at once," Shep told them. "She's got something she wants you to see. Sugar found it in the kitchen, in back of the stove. Miss Gordon thinks Cheng hid it there."

"Do you know what it is, Shep?" Rainbow asked.

"Sugar told me it was a little stone mug, half full of gold dust. He was giving the kitchen a good cleaning out when—"

"Thank God, he didn't throw it away!" Rip exclaimed. "If you boys are tagging along with me, come on! I want to see that stuff!"

CHAPTER XI

An Unexpected Meeting

FOLLOWING Sugar's surprising discovery, Glenna had ordered a thorough search made of the kitchen. The stone mug, containing about four ounces of coarse gold of a surprising purity, was all that could be found. Aware of what the gold meant, she waited with mounting eagerness for the partners to arrive. They joined her in the

other item in the *Monitor* tomorrow that may mean something to you; that Chinese bank down in 'Frisco that's been holding Cheng Wah's money has located a brother up in Vancouver."

"That's interesting," Rainbow observed. "Did you get that from San Francisco?"

"No, Sam Duck told me this afternoon. The bank's sent someone up here in connection with it. To see if there's any claims against the estate, I suppose. Will you drop in tomorrow?"

"If we get a chance," Rainbow told him. "If we wanted to have a talk with Fat Sam, would we have any trouble finding his place?"

"Not at all. Just go down the main street of Chinatown till you pass the Seng Choy Trading Company. That's the biggest store down there. About halfway down the next block you'll see Sam's place. It's a one-story brick building, with his name plastered all over the windows."

The partners left him and stepped into dining room. They found only a handful of people there.

"Doesn't seem to be anyone givin' us the once-over," the little one observed. "Reckon we won't be in town long before that combine will have somebody keepin' cases on us."

The Humboldt conducted a livery and feed barn at the rear of the hotel, reached by a back door at the end of the hall.

"We don't want to be tailed tonight," Rip said. "When we get through here we'll go back and have a look at our horses. We can walk down the alley, then."

It was well after dark when they started for the Chinese quarter. Instead of taking the road that ran past the large willows, they slipped through the fence that enclosed the pasture lot and crossed the fields. By moonlight, the section lost much of its ugliness. Lanterns bobbed gently in the evening breeze. Getting their bearings by locating the building that housed the Seng Choy Company, they turned into a side road that ended in the sagebrush. A hundred yards brought them unobserved to the main street, where they found themselves almost opposite Sam Lee Duck's establishment. There were so few loiterers and passersby that Grumpy remarked the fact.

"That's unusual, for a mild evenin', Rip."

"It is," the tall man agreed. "Let's stand here and watch Fat Sam's place a few minutes. I can see a clerk in there behind the counter. I suppose the office and living quarters are out in back."

They had not had the store under observation more than ten to twelve minutes, when they saw the fat man and Buck Mullhall emerge from a back room. Finding Buck there did not surprise them. They could not hear what he was saying, but they could see that his face was black with rage. Lee Duck appeared to listen imperturbably, even when Buck's gestures became threatening. With a final tirade, the latter slammed out of the door and strode up the street, his shoulders hunched angrily.

"They're getting near the breaking point," Rip muttered, with manifest satisfaction. "We'll see if we can't help things along."

THEY waited until they were sure Mullhall was not coming back before they crossed the street. Fat Sam had disappeared in back again. Approaching the door, the partners thought the clerk was the only one in the room, but as they stepped inside they found two furtive-eyed yellow men seated at a small table in an alcove near the door, ostensibly playing mah jong. Their interest in the tiles was open to suspicion.

"A couple of Fat Sam's bodyguards," Grumpy muttered under his breath. " Same breed as the scar-faced highbinder that blazed away at me with the shotgun!"

"They know us," Rip answered. "We want to see Sam," he told the clerk. The latter shook his head emphatically and said in heavy pidgin: "Velly sorry, missa boss, him not come now. Velly busy. You come back all same tomorrow."

"You tell Fat Sam we're here," Rip insisted. "You know who we are.

Don't give us any argument about it. He'll see us."

The clerk hesitated momentarily, and after a glance at the mah jong players, shuffled out through a rear door. When he reappeared a few moments later, Sam Lee Duck was with him. The fat man gave the partners a meaningless grin.

"I have been expecting you, gentlemen," he said, his eyes opaque and unreadable behind their mounds of fat. "You honor my humble establishment with your presence. Won't you come into my office?"

"I think we can transact our business right here," Rainbow replied. "I've got a couple ounces of gold that I want to turn into currency."

"Certainly!" The fat man permitted himself an amused chuckle. "I thought your business with me was of another nature." He gave Rip a bland smile. "There are so many places in town where you could have been accommodated. Why do you come to me with your gold, Mr. Ripley?"

"Because you've handled the rest of this stuff. I wondered if you'd recognize it."

He had the gold in a tobacco tin. He handed it to the Chinese. Sam Lee Duck waddled around to the rear of the counter and lifted the small brass pan out of the old-fashioned balance he used. The clerk moved a lamp nearer.

The partners watched the fat man's pulpy face closely as he poured the gold into the pan. If what he saw startled him in the least, he gave no sign of it. His expression was vaguely mocking as he glanced up at Rainbow. He spoke to his clerk in his native tongue. The clerk handed him an eyescope.

A glance appeared to be enough for Sam Lee Duck. He took the scope from his eye, and his huge, obese body began to shake with laughter. "I'm afraid this is a remarkably bad joke, Mr. Ripley! You didn't expect me to recognize this peculiarly coarse dust. You were confident I would deny any knowledge of it. It is, of course, the same gold that my countryman, Cheng Wah-kee began bringing to me last fall."

"How much did you buy of him?" Rip demanded, trying to hide his chagrin.

The fat man shrugged. "It will take only a moment to be correct about it. My accounts are always in order."

The clerk scurried into a back room and returned with a ledger. He cast up the account quickly.

"Two hundred and two ounces," he proclaimed.

"No great amount, you see," Lee Duck purred. "But a small fortune for a humble Chinese cook." His counterfeit amusement faded suddenly, and his narrowed slanting eyes were hard as steel. "This gold you have brought in is obviously some Cheng Wah-kee had hidden somewhere. I had only to deny ever having seen it before to convince you that I killed him. Oh, yes, it was as simple as that in your mind!" He shook his head with withering contempt. "You will have to do better that that. Murder is not my business, Mr. Ripley."

"There's two opinions about that!" Grumpy lashed out. "I ain't no mind reader, but I know the bushwhackin' we almost rode into at Silvey's Crick wa'n't thought up by the Chinaman who was there to do the shootin'!"

"LET it go!" Rip intervened. "Give me the money, Lee Duck and we'll be on our way!"

The clerk weighed the gold and gave the fat man the amount due. From the bulging wallet the latter counted out some bills and placed them on the counter. Rainbow was picking them up, when, for the first time, the fat man noticed the ring he was wearing. It wrung a startled grunt out of him. His broad, yellow face was no longer an impassive mask. His eyelids lifted and surprise pulled his mouth down. Rainbow caught it, and he sensed that it was surprise mixed with regret and fear.

"You wear the ring of the family of Seng, Mr. Ripley. May I inquire

who found you worthy of such great honor?"

"A brave and gallant member of that family—Seng Mei-lang."

The effect of that name on Lee Duck was too profound to be dissembled. A string of harsh Chinese gutturals escaped him. He wagged his head in what seemed to be bitter self-reproach. "I am reminded of your proverb that says if you will have something well done, do it yourself. Unfortunately, I have to depend on fools."

"I agree with you if you are referring to the one we saw leaving just before we came in." Rip's tone was thin and taunting. "He could be your undoing."

The little one and he started for the door, only to have the fat man call them back. His eyes were crafty again.

"Gentlemen, the China Specie Bank of California has sent an agent here to inquire into the estate of Cheng Wah-kee. We were just about to sit down to discuss the matter when my clerk announced that you wished to see me. Perhaps you have some questions you would like to ask the bank's representative before they release the money; they have found a brother, Chen Wo-ling."

"I have," Rainbow answered bluntly.

Sam Lee Duck spread his fat hands and bowed. "If you will honor my unworthy home, follow me. I assure you it will be quite safe." The diamond in his right ear sparkled balefully.

Grumpy shook his head. "This don't sound right," he growled. Over his shoulder he shot a hostile glance at the mah jong players.

"Come on!" Rainbow was insistent.

The fat man led the way down the hall and ushered them into his living room. The richness of its furnishings caused the partners no surprise. The room was large and dimly lit. At one of the heavily draped windows overlooking the river, a girl stood, her back to them. A small Siamese kitten, its coat as black as her hair, had perched on her shoulder, and she was stroking it idly. She turned as they entered, and Rainbow and the little one saw that it was Seng Mei-lang.

She was as exquisitely beautiful as ever. She wore the traditional sleeveless black gown of the Chinese, its clinging smoothness revealing the delicate perfection of her figure. She did not appear surprised at finding them there.

"Rainbow!" she exclaimed, without raising her voice. "And Mr. Gibbs!" Her slow smile laid its soft caress on the tall man. He crossed the room, and she gave him her hand. "I knew you were in Nevada City. I am staying at the home of my cousin, Seng Choy. I saw your names in the local paper." She turned to Lee Duck. "We are old friends," she explained.

The fat man nodded. "I noticed that he wears the lucky talisman of the family of Seng. I expected Mr. Ripley to be surprised at finding you were the bank's agent."

"If I disappointed you you will have to charge it to my intuition," said Rainbow. The sharpness of his tone caused Mei-lang to speak at once of her errand for the bank.

"OUR society was largely responsible for locating Cheng Wah-kee's brother," she said. "I doubt that claims will be made against the estate. I will place the required legal notice in the newspaper tomorrow."

"You had a question to ask, Mr. Ripley," Lee Duck murmured, lowering himself into a chair. Mei-lang had placed the kitten on the floor. It leaped on a table and reached the back of the fat man's chair, where it stood perched, its back arched angrily as it made noises at Grumpy.

"My question has been answered," said Rainbow. "I just wanted to be sure that this brother had not been manufactured out of thin air for the occasion. I don't underestimate your talents."

A short laugh shook Sam Lee Duck. "Astonishing! You are a remarkably suspicious man. When we were interrupted, Miss Seng, you were about to tell me something re-

garding a letter that Cheng Wo-ling had received."

"Yes. It is fortunate that I can mention it to the three of you. He informs us that some time in September of last year, his brother wrote him that he had found gold, and that he was cautiously taking out a little at a time and not mentioning his secret to anyone. The amount of money he left seems to substantiate the statement. But the bank has been unable to find any record of his having filed a claim."

Fat Sam continued to pet the kitten for a moment or two. When he lifted his multiple chins and met Rainbow's accusing eyes it was without slightest sign that Mei-lang's story caused him any dismay.

"We know that in the course of his prospecting he found gold," he told her. His tone was patronizing and sure. "He brought me one hundred and two ounces of it. Tonight, these gentlemen appear with several ounces more that Cheng Wah-kee had hidden. I recognized it at once." He spread his pudgy hands in an eloquent gesture of mock despair. "You see, Miss Seng, Mr. Ripley and his partner have already convicted me in their minds of the death of Cheng Wah-kee. Having bought his gold, they presume to believe that I had him watched, discovered his deposit and had him murdered. They are equally certain that I arranged to have them slain. Fortunately, they have no evidence to substantiate their contentions, or they would not be here playing cat and mouse with me."

Mei-lang drew herself up proudly and let the partners feel her displeasure. "We Chinese are accustomed to being regarded with suspicion," she exclaimed pointedly. "I am glad you can jest about it, Lee Duck. You have been a respected businessman in Nevada City for almost thirty years I, personally, know how generous your contributions to the China Society have always been, as well as your other benefactions. I do not know on what this misunderstanding is based, but before such an absurd charge could be taken seriously, something more definite than suspicion and ugly coincidence will have to be produced."

The thought crossed Rip's mind that the confidence she expressed in the fat man had its purpose and was not what she honestly believed. Grumpy, however, was completely taken in.

"He accused himself, Miss Seng!" he declared resentfully. "He didn't wait for us to say he had Cheng knocked off—"

"That's neither here nor there!" Rainbow interjected. "I've always found the last laugh to be much the best one, and I'm sure that's been Lee Duck's experience, too. As for this mine, or whatever it was, that Cheng had, his heirs have no claim to it. In fact, by failing to register it, he never had legal title to it himself. . . Did his brother produce the letter of his own accord?"

"Certainly," Mei-lang murmured.

"That's enough, then, to remove him from any suspicion of having committed the crime. The fifty-odd dollars I received tonight will be turned over to you. And there is the small matter of a month's wages due Cheng, which I'm sure Miss Gordon will want to give you. These things can be taken care of before you return to California."

A SERVANT came in with a pot of tea and a bowl of small almond cakes, and bowed himself out. Mei-lang filled the tiny cups, her long, graceful fingers holding Rip's attention. Sam Lee Duck seemed to only half listen to their conversation. He had filled a tiny pipe, settled back comfortably in his big chair, the kitten asleep in his lap and the blue haze of tobacco smoke curling lazily about him. He appeared as harmless as a beneficent, well-fed Buddha. He took the cup of tea Mei-lang offered him and sipped it between puffs on his pipe. For all his seeming inattention, he not only weighed carefully every word that was spoken, but supplied his own answers to much that was not said. When Mei-lang turned the conversation back to what Rainbow had said about Cheng Wah's mine, it rang a danger

signal in his shrewd mind, though he continued to sip his tea with Oriental gusto.

"You spoke as though you doubted that Cheng Wah-kee had sunk a shaft and opened a mine," she said. "Working alone, in just his spare time, I don't suppose he could have managed it."

"He could hardly have kept it a secret," said Rip.

"Then it must have been just a rich, exposed ledge that he found."

"That could explain it," was the guarded answer.

The fat man roused himself. "Have you considered the possibility of his having discovered a cache, Mr. Ripley? The gold he found may have been buried by some high-grader, back in the days when the Old Glory and other mines were producing heavily."

It gave Rainbow a better chance than he had anticipated. "That would hardly call for an *arrastre,* would it?"

Mei-lang failed to understand, but Sam Lee Duck understood him perfectly. He exploded in a flesh-shaking burst of laughter.

"So you have seen Mullhall's *arrastre,* eh? That is very amusing—connecting it with Cheng Wah-kee's little pot of gold! Hadn't you heard that he acquired title to the Old Glory? He got it for two hundred dollars. It is his intention to rework the old tailings." Another burst of laughter shook Lee Duck. "It shows how foolish a man can be! I predict it will never show him a profit!"

Rainbow had to admire the thoroughness with which this obese Chinese covered himself. For two hundred dollars he had acquired an iron-clad alibi for the *arrastre.* It was enough to make the tall man realize what difficulties he and Grumpy faced.

"It's been a very entertaining evening," he said, as he saw Mei-lang reach for her cape.

"I trust this will not be your last visit." Lee Duck got to his feet. "You are a very good tonic, Mr. Ripley."

Rainbow dropped Mei-lang's cape about her shoulders. The fat man had a parting word for her. He looked up to find Rip gazing down at the eddying river. The tall man's thought was close to the surface and Lee Duck read it correctly.

"It's very convenient, isn't it?" he inquired softly.

"Very—for certain purposes."

"Exactly!" The accompanying chuckle held a sinister note. "The river undercuts its banks along here. When they cave in it is very dangerous if one is caught below."

Rainbow nodded. "Dangerous and final."

The fat man accompanied them to the street door. The two mah jong players were still in the alcove. Grumpy eyed them fiercely.

"I'm glad to git out of that place!" he grumbled, as they hurried up the street. "It was givin' me the creeps!"

It was against custom for a Chinese woman to be abroad after dark. Mei-lang was aware of it. There were only one or two men on the sidewalk, but from within doors curious, interested eyes followed them.

"We haven't far to go," Rip said, conscious of the pressure of her hand on his arm. "Have you anything to say to me, Mei-lang?"

"Yes, and it may surprise you. You came into the quarter the afternoon you arrived in Nevada City. Hoy Gee, who was very faithful to me when I was in Black Rock, saw you from a window. When he learned why you were here, he went to my cousin, Seng Choy. Choy wrote me."

"Then you knew before you left San Francisco that we were in Nevada again?"

She smiled. "My errand for the bank is only an excuse for my presence. I may need your help more than you'll need mine." Her tone had become tense and sober. "That man is shrewd and ruthless, Rainbow. I don't believe I fooled him in the slightest degree tonight."

Rip's mouth whipped tight. "If your business concerns him, you are not safe here!"

She nodded ever so slightly, and he felt her fingers tighten their pressure on his arm. "There is dan-

ger here for both of us," she whispered.

CHAPTER XII

Grim Promise

TURNING the corner of the rambling building that housed the Seng Choy Trading Company, Rainbow was struck by the unusual number of Chinese gathered within. He knew it was the custom of the men to congregate in the stores in the evening, just as it was their habit to visit freely on the street. Seeing four or five there would not have surprised him. But there were over a dozen, and the street was deserted. Coupled together, the two facts made him distinctly aware of the vague tension that rested on the quarter tonight. He could not help wondering if Mei-lang's presence had anything to do with it.

"That may well be," she said, when he mentioned the matter. "These people have been under Lee Duck's heel so long, and have been so helpless to do anything about it, that even a whisper of possible deliverance would excite them. The source of the man's prosperity is no secret to them. But they have always been afraid to say anything; they've seen too many people disappear mysteriously after having dared to question his business."

She had a key to the side door that led into the part of the building in which Seng Choy lived with his family.

"I want you to come in for a few minutes," she said. "We are being watched, of course."

"Suppose we do a little of that ourselves," Grumpy suggested. "You go in, Rip. I'll drift across the street and keep an eye on this door."

Seng Choy's wife and daughter were in the living room. Mei-lang spoke to them in Chinese, and when they had withdrawn, she stood there a moment, her back to Rip, a breathless eagerness on her lips. But she was resolved to keep this moment impersonal and not let him see what being alone with him again meant to her. When she turned to him, her face was a beautiful and emotionless mask. In a voice that was coldly professional, she said:

"My mission here is not a happy one. I—"

It was as far as she got, for in Rainbow's gray eyes she found something that defeated her. Her breasts lifted as she held her breath.

"You have not changed since I saw you last," she murmured, in quite another tone.

"Nor you. It's strange that we should meet again, Mei-lang. When I saw you tonight I was foolish enough to hope for a moment that my being here was in some small degree responsible for your presence . . .I could wish that were true."

Her smile was warm and tender. "Your intuition seldom fails you. If it will please you to have me say it, it is true."

He caught her hand impulsively and raised it to his lips. With his voice tense with emotion, he said, "I've never forgotten that I held you in my arms for a moment once. I knew it was the beginning and end of a dream."

"Please!" she implored. "Don't make this moment more difficult than it is!"

"I only want to be frank with you, Mei-lang! I am thinking only of your safety when I tell you that I want you to leave Nevada City as quickly as you can. If I could have my way, I'd put you on the train for San Francisco tonight. I know how brave you are, but courage carried too far is just foolhardiness."

"Lee Duck—"

"It's not Sam Lee Duck I fear, half as much as his white partners! He, at least, knows his days are numbered if he strikes at you. Your people will see to that if no one else does. But that won't mean anything to Mullhall or Daggett. If they suspect why you are here, they'll kill you just as quickly as they would Grump and me!"

HIS concern touched her, but she shook her head firmly. "I

know you mean it for my good," she said. "I feel I have a duty to perform, however, and I refuse to be frightened. . . You seem to take it for granted that you know to what I refer."

"From what you've said, it can be only one thing. In some way you've learned that Lee Duck's gang is part of a ring that is smuggling aliens into Nevada and shipping them to California."

"That is the ugly truth," she acknowledged. "Every intelligent Chinese in America abhors this underground business. The men who are brought in are mostly poor, ignorant Cantonese. Without knowing it, they virtually sell themselves into slavery. You read in the newspapers about tong killings in San Francisco and New York. Oftener than not the victim is just one of these men who has entered the country illegally and been unable to keep up his payments to the smugglers. We feel that the Exclusion Act is a great injustice. We hope to have it repealed, but we know that will never be done until we stamp out this criminal evasion of the law."

It didn't take Rip long to lay before her the evidence that Grumpy and he had turned up.

"That ought to be enough," he said. "I know that when those facts are given to the Immigration Service, they can move in and smash this ring. But before that's done I want to get the evidence to convict these men of the murder of Cheng and Gordon. If we can get a conviction on one crime, we'll be able to get a confession on the other. There's no reason why you should run the risk of remaining here. The matter of smashing this smuggling ring will be taken care of."

"You've certainly made my task very simple," Mei-lang admitted. "I'm not foolish enough to believe you are anxious to have me leave because you are secretly afraid I'll take some step that will defeat your plans. I think we understand each other better than that."

"I hope so," he muttered soberly.

"Please don't scowl at me," she said, with a smile. "Would you agree to my staying if I were to promise you that I shall do nothing whatever about the underground? There is work for me to do here among my own people. They need someone to advise them, Rainbow."

He considered his answer for a long moment before giving it. When it came, it was a question. "Is that your only reason for wanting to remain?"

Mei-lang gazed at him with an obscure amusement. "You are so confident of success that you refuse to consider the possibility of my being of some help to you, don't you?"

"Not at all!" he exclaimed gruffly. "I know what I've got ahead of me. Your help would be priceless; but, I refuse to permit you to take that chance."

"If I should insist?"

"Have it your way," Rainbow said, with a grim shake of his head. "I hope you'll at least take the precaution of picking out three or four men you can depend on and keeping them close to you. Grump and I will be in and out of town. If we happen to be up in the valley, and you need help, go to the sheriff. Don't let the talk you'll hear against him, and his feud with us, fool you; Marsh Burling is all right. In the few hours you have been here, have you heard anything said about the attempt to rub us out at Silvey's Creek?"

"One of Lee Duck's hirelings was seen for the last time that afternoon. You saw the man your partner killed. Did he have a deep knife scar on his left cheek?"

"Yes, he did—it ran from the corner of his eye almost to his mouth. . . . What was his name?"

"Lun Fat. I don't believe you'll ever be able to prove it."

"Neither do I," said Rip. "I'd almost have to produce the body, and there isn't a chance in a million that I could do that now. But Sam Lee Duck has left himself open somewhere along the line. I know he's clever, but he made a mistake when he took white men into partnership. If I succeed in pulling him down it

will be through Mullhall or Daggett."

WHEN he was ready to leave he made sure that the little one was still across the street before he opened the door. They struck back toward town at once, too intent on probing the shadows under the willows to have anything to say until they reached the main road. Rainbow recounted what he had learned from Mei-lang.

"Fat Sam won't risk trottin' any of those yellow boys down to the station and puttin' them on the train for California as long as she's here!" Grumpy declared. "If he's got any of 'em on his hands, he'll do somethin' to git rid of 'em. He don't aim to be caught with any evidence like that."

"Maybe that was in his mind when he spoke about those cut banks along the river caving in without warning," the tall man observed thinly. "He beat us to the punch tonight. But he pointed up one thing that I can't get out of my mind. . . What was the source of Cheng Wah's gold? We don't know, and he knows we don't. You build an *arrastre* to mill ore; on the other hand, what Mei-lang said about Cheng working by himself in his spare time holds true. He couldn't have sunk a shaft and taken out that quantity of gold. I wish I had thought of going to an assayer with the stuff I sold him tonight. A good man might be able to tell us something about it. I wouldn't mind going all the way down to Reno to find out."

"We can go out to the ranch and git what's in the safe in the mornin'," Grumpy suggested.

"I think we better do it," said Rip. "This is one question we've got to crack."

They took a turn up and down the street before going up to their room. There was a crowd in the Lucky Boy. The other saloons were almost empty.

"You want to bust in here for a minute?" the little one asked, as they were passing Mullhall's place.

"Suppose we do. I wouldn't mind seeing who Buck's got hanging around."

On their way up to the bar they were aware of Daggett, playing cards in the rear. There were the usual onlookers about the table. Mullhall was not in evidence. The partners ordered a drink and ran an eye over the crowd. Most of those present were obviously cowpunchers, in from the nearby ranches, and townspeople. Several were not, but their faces stirred no glimmer of recognition in the minds of Rip or the little man. They hung around a few minutes.

"Nothing in there to interest us particularly," Rainbow said, as they reached the street. "I'm almost ready for bed."

The little one pulled down the shades before he lit the lamp in their room at the Humboldt. "Turn in if you want," he said. "I'm goin' to smoke my pipe a few minutes. You can turn out the light."

Rip looked up suspiciously. "What's wrong?"

"A couple gents standing in a doorway across the street. They seem to be interested in this room. If they're jest makin' shore that we're in for the night, they'll drift along when the light goes out."

Rainbow pulled off his boots and stretched out on the bed. If they were being kept under surveillance it was no less than he expected. The effect of seeing Mei-lang again rested heavily on him. He was aware of the barrier that stood between them. He knew it could never be levelled. And yet she held all that he ever wanted to find in a woman. With his face turned to the wall, he could not resist forgetting the realities for a minute or two and permit the lure of her to sweep along his racing thoughts.

"It's been ten minutes," Grumpy broke in on his musing. "That's more'n time for a man to undress. Suppose you douse the lamp."

WITH the room is darkness he peered around the edge of the shade. He continued to stand there.

Finally, Rainbow reared up to question him. "They still there?"

"Yeh! The town marshal jest passed. They started walkin' when they saw him comin', but they turned back. No question but it's for us they got spotted. They're not goin' to be satisfied with knowin' we've turned in for the night; they're goin' to be shore we stay here. It looks to me like there's somethin' behind this! It don't stand to reason that they'd want to be certain they had us pegged off if there wa'n't somethin' stirrin'!"

Rainbow's thoughts flew to Mei-lang. "You may be right, Grump!" He hurried to the window and watched the two men in the doorway for a minute. "We'll wait a bit and see what they do."

Their waiting was interrupted by a tapping at their door. "Let me in, Ripley!" came the sharp summons. They recognized Marsh Burling's voice. Grumpy unlocked the door. By the light that streamed in from the hall the sheriff saw that they were fully dressed.

"Why are you sitting here in the dark with your clothes on?" Marsh questioned uneasily. "Strange, I'd say!"

Rainbow enlightened him as to the reason.

"Well, that ties in with what's on my mind," said Burling. "I arrived here by way of the alley. Let me have a peek across the street." A glance satisfied him. "Two men hanging out over there in the doorway, all right!" He wheeled around on the partners. "Put these things together and see what you make of them. First, Quinn River Bill Jensen and a couple other men rode into town tonight from Mullhall's ranch. They've disappeared, and it ain't their habit to head back for the valley this early. Second, Mullhall hasn't showed his nose in the Lucky Boy in over an hour. I've looked in there two or three times this evening. I just came from there now. I asked Daggett where Buck was. Speed was vague about it; thought Buck had just stepped out for a minute. I noticed that several other familiar faces were missing. Now, here's this pair watching you. What does it add up to? They can't be thinking of ganging up on you boys."

Rainbow reached for his boots hurriedly. There was no question left in his mind as to what was afoot. "This thing is aimed at a friend of mine in Chinatown! I was afraid something of the sort would happen but I didn't think it would come as quickly as this!"

He told Burling about Mei-lang briefly, his voice tight with anxiety.

"Get your horses up and get down there!" Marsh rapped. "I'll take care of that pair across the street and follow you as soon as I can. It ain't my job to police the town, but I'll take a hand in this. No use looking for the marshal; Leffingwell won't be around!"

Rainbow and the little one ran down the stairs and out the back door to the barn. They flashed down the alley at a driving gallop a few minutes later and swung into the main street, a block away. They were no sooner beyond the big willows and into Chinatown than their fears were confirmed. Windows had been thrown up, and men and women were hanging out, excitedly watching the attempt of better than half a dozen white men to smash their way into the store of the Seng Choy Company. Most of the store windows had been smashed already, and as the partners dashed up the street the sound of shattering glass and splintering wood announced the breaching of the door.

The attackers tried to rush in, only to be driven back. Before they could swarm in again, a Chinese on the roof, armed with a sawed-off shotgun, fired into their midst. The gun was loaded with nothing heavier than bird shot, but the cries of pain and rage left no doubt that some of the tiny pellets had found their mark.

One of the wounded thugs whipped up a gun and fired a string of futile shots at the roof. He and his companions retreated to the middle of the street, but they were not safe there, for, from the windows opposite, a shower of missiles, including a pot of boiling water, was showered down on them.

"We got here in time!" Grumpy yelled at Rip, as they came down the street at a full gallop. The tall man jerked a savage nod at him.

"Charge right into that bunch!" he ordered. "If they don't scatter, use your gun!"

THE watching Chinese in the windows mistook them for reinforcements and hurled anything they could lay their hands on. For a moment, the huddling group in the middle of the street was fooled, too. When they realized their mistake, it was too late. Rainbow and the little one drove into them, quirts cracking, and scattered them like quail. Rip recognized Quinn River Bill. Jensen tried to pull him out of the saddle as the tall man's horse crashed into him. Rainbow struck him across the mouth with his quirt. The man reeled back against Grumpy, and the little one pulled his foot out of the stirrup and sent him crashing down with a savage kick.

Their rush carried the partners beyond the corner. When they flung themselves out of their saddles and ran back, Quinn River Bill was the only one of the hoodlums left in sight, the others having scurried up the side street and taken to the brush. Jensen got up, a gun in his fist. Rip leaped at him and sent him sprawling. Quinn River Bill was no longer young, but he was a powerful, raw-boned man. He got his arm free and tried to twist his pistol around on Rainbow. The latter brought his bootheel down on it and kicked it away. Rolling clear, he waited for Jensen to get up.

"I got him covered!" the little one growled.

"You keep out of this!" Rainbow snapped. "I'm going to give this pup a licking he won't forget!"

He had seen enough to tell him that Quinn River Bill had led this attempt of Mullhall's to take Meilang out of Chinatown by force. That Jensen had not succeeded in doing anything more than wrecking the Seng Choy Company's store had no palliating effect on the white hot fury blazing in Rainbow.

The raw-boned six-footer hauled himself to his feet, his mouth a smear of blood from the cut the quirt had made. He prided himself on his ability as a rough-and-tumble fighter, and after balancing himself on his spread legs for a moment, he rushed in, head lowered and both fists flying. The maneuver was not unexpected. Rip stepped aside nimbly and straightened him up with a long right hand. It rocked Jensen, and the blow he aimed at Rainbow's jaw was so wild it passed harmlessly over the latter's shoulder. It left Bill off balance. That was all the opening the tall man needed. His left hand did not travel over eighteen inches, but it crashed into Jensen's jaw with the bone-crushing impact of a Mexican mule lashing out an offending barn door.

Quinn River struck back feebly, his eyes foggy, and Rip hit him again. He was methodically cutting the man to pieces, when Marsh Burling pushed through the crowd of excited Chinese who had moved out into the street to watch the fight.

"What goes on here?" Marsh demanded, puffing like a grampus. He got in between the two men. Jensen acted as though he was glad to see him. The sheriff gave Rainbow the wink. "Every time I run into you, Ripley, you and your runty partner are raising hell!" he growled. "Is this a street fight, or what?"

"Suppose you ask Jensen," Rip answered. "You can see what they did to that store."

Quinn River Bill was in no condition to talk for a minute or two. When he recovered his wits, his story was that he and some boys had been in Chinatown, seeing the sights, when a Chinese had passed a remark about them. They had chased him into the Seng Choy Company and the fight had followed.

"That's all there was to it, Burling, till these gents rode us down," he insisted.

Rainbow nodded for Marsh to accept that tale.

"Some property damage to pay for," the sheriff told Jensen. "I better take you up town and let Leffingwell

lock you up for the night. Mullhall can bail you out in the morning." He motioned for the crowd to break up. "Go back to your houses! The excitement's all over! Go on, scatter!"

"Burling, can I speak to you for a minute?" Rip asked.

"I SUPPOSE so," Marsh grumbled, walking aside with him. "Is everything okay?" he asked under his breath, as soon as they were out of earshot of Jensen.

"I think so," Rainbow replied. "We'll stick around a while. Thank God, you got to us when you did! You take Jensen's story; that'll be the best way out."

They were about to part when Sam Lee Duck trudged up to them. Rip stabbed him with a cold glance.

"Mr. Burling, this is the first time anything like this has occurred here," the fat man said precisely. "I assure you it will not happen again." He bowed to Rainbow. "I am glad you arrived when you did."

It was all he had to say. Marsh walked off with Jensen, and Rip watched Lee Duck make his way back to his own establishment.

"He didn't fancy the idea of facin' this Seng Choy and his friends, did he?" Grumpy muttered sarcastically.

"We'll go in and talk to them," Rainbow advised. "They've got a light burning again."

A wizened little Chinese came forward to meet them as they entered. He bowed and introduced himself.

"I am Seng Choy," he said. "So happy you gentlemen arrive when you did." He had no less than a dozen men guarding the store with him. They grinned at the partners.

"You boys put up a good fight," the tall man said. "I don't believe you'll have any more trouble tonight. But I'd board up the windows, Choy."

The bolt on the heavy door that led to the living quarters was thrown back, and Mei-lang stepped into the store, her dignity as unassailable as ever.

"Thanks to you, we were not caught off guard, Rainbow," she said, with a little nod of gratitude. Rip gazed at her with frank amazement.

"Is that all you have to say?" he inquired. "You know what their intentions were."

Mei-lang smiled at him with her eyes. "If they return, they will find us well prepared. . . Whom do you hold responsible for this affair?"

"Certainly not Lee Duck. He wouldn't be so crude, nor so easily defeated. We can charge this to Buck Mullhall. . . Will these men remain here the rest of the night?"

"Choy has arranged for most of them to be here day and night." Her eyes warmed and faint laughter touched her lips. "You see I'm not—as I promised you—going to be foolhardy."

It was after midnight before the partners left the quarter. They were having breakfast the next morning when they saw a man run into the hotel, his eyes wide with excitement.

"Pete!" he yelled at the clerk. "Buck Mullhall's been murdered! That Miller kid just found him out in the barn with a knife in his back!"

The parners stared at each other in silence for a minute. Grumpy was the first to recover from the shock of this news. His comment was as terse as usual.

"The fat man kept his promise, didn't he? When he told you and Burling that there wouldn't be any more white men bustin' into Chinatown, he meant it!"

Rainbow nodded soberly. "He sure did!"

CHAPTER XIII

Out of the Dim Past

WHEN the partners reached Mullhall's barn they found a crowd of the curious already gathered. Burling had taken charge. Webb Pennoyer, the youthful district attorney, and Case Leffingwell, the town marshal, were also present. All three were awaiting the arrival of the coroner. Rip and Grumpy edged into the barn and had a look at the body. Marsh contin-

ued the pretense of animosity between them.

"I'll have to ask you gents to step outside," he said curtly.

"Okay," Rainbow muttered, with equal unfriendliness. "It might be to our mutual advantage to have a little talk."

Burling caught the hint. "If you've got anything to say to me, come to my office; you'll find me there in about thirty minutes. I got my hands full now!"

"We'll be there," Rip told him.

He and the little one went back to the hotel and finished breakfast. When they reached the sheriff's office, Marsh had not yet arrived. He came in a few minutes later, a wintry look on his tanned face. He locked the door behind him and sat down heavily at his desk.

"This complicates matters for me," he said soberly. "My enemies—and most of my friends—will be after my scalp if I don't straighten this thing out in a hurry. Who killed Mullhall ain't no more of a mystery to me than it is to you. But it's the same story again; no evidence. Leaving that knife sticking in him was done on purpose. It was bought at the Nevada City Mercantile. Brown tells me they sell two or three dozen a year. It'd been wiped off; not a print on it!"

"Has the coroner placed the time of the killing?" Rip asked.

"He says Buck had been dead only a couple hours when the Miller boy found him. That'd make it about five a. m. He was evidently going out to the barn to saddle a horse, and found somebody waiting for him." Big Marsh slapped his hat down on the desk disgustedly. "It gives Daggett a perfect alibi. The game he was in ran through the night, and they were still at it this morning. He's got half a dozen men who swear he never left the table except to go to the inside toilet. But hellsfire, I didn't need that to tell me he didn't have anything to do with this! We were as good as told to our face last night that Mullhall's number was up!"

Rainbow nodded. "No question about it, Marsh. That's why we wanted to see you before you made a move. No matter how tough the going gets, you've got to sit tight for a few days and do nothing. With half a break, we'll give this country a house-cleaning it won't forget, and we'll have it tied up into a neat package before we call in the federal marshals and the Immigration Service."

Burling bounced up in his chair. "So that's it!" he burst out excitedly. "Smuggling Chinamen down from Canada!" He brought his clenched fist down on his desk with a bang. "That's what this gang has been fattening on for a year or two!"

Rip told him what he and Grumpy knew about it. Marsh seemed to age as he sat there listening. At the end, he could only shake his head grimly.

"I never tumbled to it," he muttered. "What happened last night in Chinatown begins to make sense to me now. Fat Sam hasn't been fooled by Miss Seng's story about coming up here for the bank; he knows her real purpose. He evidently told Buck enough to put the panic on him. When the old priate refused to have her put out of the way, Mullhall took it on himself to do it."

"That's the way we see it," Grumpy agreed. "Buck got too big for his boots. Daggett will step up now and take over the saloon and ranch. He'll have an example in front of him that'll keep him from gittin' too ambitious."

"HE'LL be smarter than Mullhall," Rainbow prophesied. He told Burling they were going up the valley, and asked if there was a good assayer in town. Marsh shook his head.

"You better take that gold down to Reno," he advised. "It's the history of it, not its value, that you want. There ain't no one in town could give you that information. A man like John Brownlee would be a good one to see."

They talked for the better part of an hour, with the sheriff agreeing to keep an eye on the Chinese quarter

and let the situation in regard to Buck Mullhall's murder simmer along without pointing any suspicion in Sam Lee Duck's direction.

At Rocking Chair the partners found the tension of the past few days somewhat relaxed. In twenty-four hours not a sick cow had been found. Nightwind had his men posted in the Signals, as he had promised, but they had seen no one. The news Rip and the little one brought served notice on Glenna and him that a sinister shadow still lay over the ranch.

"I can't understand Cheng's lack of confidence in us—especially in Father," Glenna said, in a shocked voice. "Of course, I shall be glad to turn Cheng's wages over to Miss Seng."

"I don't believe it was a matter of Cheng not having confidence in your father," Rip told her. "I believe fear would describe it better. I know Chinese are cautious; but he was so cautious I can't help believing he knew there was something about the gold he discovered that would get him into trouble."

"You mean it belonged to someone else?" Nightwind put in.

"That might be it. Naturally, I don't put any stock in Sam Lee Duck's suggestion that it had been cached by some high-grader in the old days. But the man likes to deal in half truths to confuse you. I wouldn't be making the trip down to Reno with a sample of the gold if I wasn't reasonably sure it held an important secret."

"I'll get it for you," Glenna said. She studied the dull yellow contents of the stone mug before she handed it to Rainbow. "I know so little about it—it looks just like ordinary gold to me. . . How long do you expect to be gone?"

"Not over two days. I don't want you to be discouraged over what happened to Mullhall. Putting him out of the way is not going to make our job any easier. On the other hand, it won't help Fat Sam either; he's in too deep to save himself by splitting with Daggett and the rest of that gang."

"You were goin' to ask Miss Glenna if Cheng didn't have some letters and other papers," Grumpy reminded him.

"He had a few things in a little tin trunk," she told them. "I turned the papers over to Mr. Burling; he reported later that they didn't amount to anything. He'd had them translated."

"Was the trunk destroyed with the other things?" Rainbow inquired.

"I'm not sure." She offered to call Briney up to the house. Rip said not to bother, that they would go down the yard and talk to him.

"Funny Burling didn't find some addresses among the papers," the little man observed, as he and Rip left the house. "What are you interested in this trunk for? You figger there may be somethin' in back of the lining?"

"It's a likely place to hide important papers," Rainbow declared.

They found the old man swamping out the bunkhouse.

"I never did git around to burnin' thet stuff," he told them. "Thet trunk is on the trash pile. Saw it t'other day. It ain't wuth two cents. I'll show it to yuh."

THEY found the trunk under a discarded mattress.

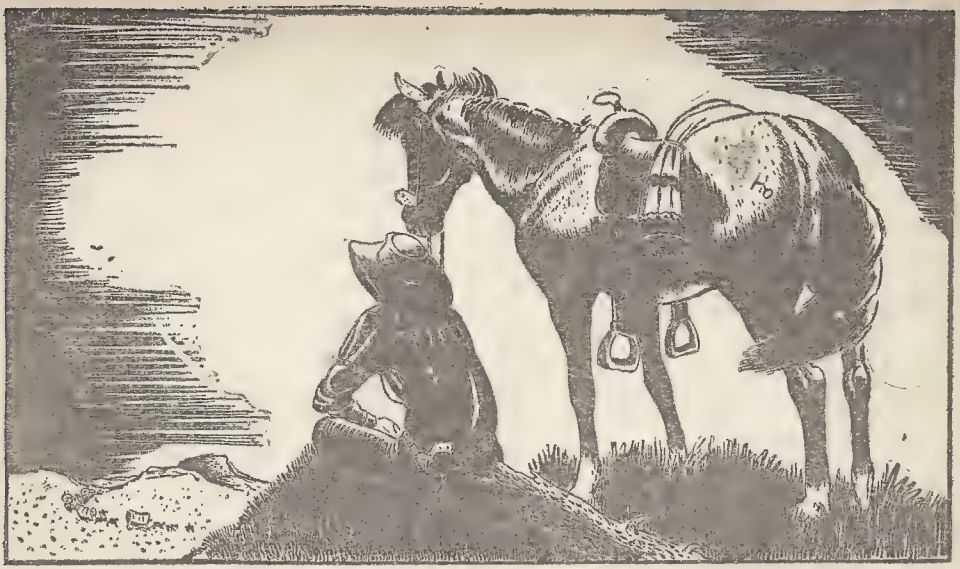
"This was all his stuff," Briney volunteered. "Even this keg o' sand. I never did figger out what thet Chink had thet in his room fer. He'd this paddle in thar, too."

Grumpy produced a knife and ripped out the lining of the trunk. "Nothin' here," he asserted. Rainbow had walked around the trash pile and was busily examining the keg of sand. The little man saw him scoop up a handful and let it trickle through his fingers. Rip repeated the operation, and a cry broke from his lips, as excited as Grumpy had ever heard him utter.

"Come here!" the tall man called triumphantly. "I can tell you what Cheng was doing with this keg of sand in his room! This is hard quartz sand; pick up a handful and see what you find!"

The little one blinked his eyes at

(Continued On Page 87)



TRAIL AND SADDLE

Fact Articles of the West

THE American frontiersman or borderer was a man, not born, but unconsciously developed by his associations, surroundings, and necessities. He may have seen the light first on the Chesapeake or the banks of the Wabash, or he may have hailed from London or Dublin.

PORTRAIT OF A FRONTIERSMAN

By Kenneth P. Wood

Far Western life clothed him with a new individuality, made him forget the tastes and habits of early life, and transformed him into one of that restless horde of cosmopolites who were the foam of that slow wave of humanity which crept toward the setting sun, and subsided at last in the wilderness, built ranches, homes, railways and cities, and in a quarter of a century added one-third to the wealth of a people in comparison with whose greatness the Roman Empire was a mimic show.

Life on the frontier was necessarily a transitory one, and quickly passed away. The peculiarities of existence and men there disappeared before fast-advancing civilization, and left no record of themselves, even as the backwoodsman has left none. And yet the frontier may be said to have had a language, a religion, and a social life of its own. The man of the border was not a "child of nature." Men never are. It is a fiction of the poets. He was, in his wildest state and his nearest approach to simplicity, a creature of education, but of an education so peculiar that the term scarcely expresses it. He was undoubtedly so different in character from the backwoodsman who has been called his prototype, and in all respects as much more modern one of that large class who were the unconscious victims of circumstances. Before migrating westward he was engaged in hewing out openings in the vast forests of Ohio and Indiana, was clad in buckskin and moccasins, and practiced in a homely manner, but con-

scientiously, the virtues of hospitality, uncouth but disinterested kindness, and general and strict personal honesty.

If he was ignorant of the graces of civilization, he also knew few of its vices. He had not been in cities and had not carried their characteristic vices with him into the wilderness. The weapon of his day was an honest rifle, and he had not an arsenal of death slung about his waist as did his successors. In all these things the frontiersman emulated the idealism of Cooper, the time-honored traditions of the middle states, and the well-established ideas of novel-reading mankind.

The ideal man of the border, the type of his class from eastern Kansas to the Rio Grande, you were apt to find in calfskin boots, with wide brimmed hat worn askew, and lower limbs encased in fancy cassimeres. There were often rings on his fingers and blazing jewels on his breast. He was inclined to be loud and defiant in dress, manner, and general deportment. He clung with the tenacity of second nature to the language of the dance hall and the brothel, and used in his discourse the picturesque phraseology of draw poker. The timely thought of Colonel Colt, which has filled more unmarked graves than the plague and eternally settled more disputes than all juries, was his constant and valued companion, and he wore the air of the king of all loafers.

BUT he was not a loafer. He was quarrelsome, jealous of honor, and still very much of a man and a friend to those who understood him. He scorned to conceal actual impressions and thoughts, but in this he was only very unnecessarily sincere and independent. He would take a stranger's last dollar at a game which he did not understand, but he would likewise lend and share to the last cent and the last morsel. He despised "airs," could not be patronized, and was intolerant toward all who disagreed with him. But he was brave, sincere, and faithful, when once enlisted in any cause. This kind of man, with the many variations which exist among classes always, was the true frontiersman. California saw him for twenty-five years. He was also in every village of Colorado and Texas, and his habitation was in every sheltered nook in many thousands of miles of plains country.

With all his faults, it may be justly said of him that he was a man who depended upon his courage, who had chosen his life and would never leave it, and who was the fit and capable vedette who stood upon the verge of a mighty civilization which was destined to follow him when he and his unconscious work passed into that dim limbo that has no historian, and leaves no record, monument, nor representative.

The proportion of men who managed to live on the border without any visible means of support was astonishing. The hangers-on of the gold mines and cattle ranches went and came unquestioned. Their dark and bearded faces disappeared, and they were gone, perhaps only for a day, though if for ever, it lead to no inquiry and excited no alarm. It is certain that the Anglo-Saxon can become anything. He can be Indianized and Mexicanized, and on the frontier he became an Arab—not a weak imitation or intentional pattern, but of his own kind, and after his own fancies and necessities. Taciturn, suspicious, and courageous, hospitable in peace and unscrupulous in enmity, the Bedouin of the West was a man who wore clothing of a familiar pattern, and spoke English—and there his resemblance to the race from which he sprung almost ended.

Yet the edge of civilization was a field for the gathering together of all kinds and classes. Here came the patient, plodding, phlegmatic German, to forget every tradition of his fatherland in the absorbing wilderness that makes all men alike. Here came the Irishman, with the rich brogue of Tipperary still on his tongue, but changed in all else which told of the green isle of peat, potatoes, and blarney. Here came the

down-east Yankee, oblivious of all the ideas of the land of baked beans and hard cider, turning his native cunning to account at monte and California jack. Here came the characteristic son of the South, still speaking the mincing dialect that has been borrowed in the name of gentility from the thick tongue of the negro, but, strange to say, forgetting to insert the "Sir" at the termination of every sentence.

BUT ALL were changed, at least in name. The German became "Dutch Bill," or "Dutch" something, no matter what; the Irishman was always "Pat." The New Englander often answered to the name of "Yank," and the Southerner was willing and proud to be called "Kaintuck," or "Tennessee," or even "Cracker." Thus was true democracy made manifest. The real names of individuals were often unknown to acquaintances of years. Any peculiarity of person or history brought about its apt cognomen of recognition. The man who squinted was "Cock-Eye" for all time. The lame man was "Limpy," and the slender and attenuated one was "Slim" Dick, or Tom, or whatever the name that was once his may have been. The surprising thing is that these monickers were accepted and gloried in. Indeed, those who were favored by some peculiarity of personal history were proudly borne. To be Buffalo Bill, Fighting Joe or Two-Gun Pete, was to be famous. "Mister" was the designation of a stranger, and if a frontiersman called an individual "Mister" after he had known him a week, it meant that he did not particularly like him, to say the least.

Brusque and rude as all this seems, there was no country where the established forms were more rigidly observed. If you were asked to "Take suthin'," it was offensive to refuse. If you were asked to "light down an' eat," it was not a mere form; you were not only really welcome, but expected to return the compliment should your host ever come your way. In the immense expanse of open country, men who lived a hundred miles apart were often near neighbors and intimate friends. The necessities of the frontier produced a freemasonry in comparison with which the actual brotherhood is a tame and meaningless thing. If a rancher or prospector loaned his neighbor a mule and told him to leave it a Curly Bill's or Slim's Place, a hundred miles away, he was certain of finding the animal there when wanted. Honesty and punctuality were the current exchange of the country, and a short shift and a sudden ending was the need of absolute necessity to him who habitually wronged his neighbor.

Another bond of union among all white men on the border was common enmity to the Indian. Hatred of the Apache and Commanche would be the uppermost feeling in the frontiersman's mind so long as there was a disputed territory claimed alike by him and his enemy. Year by year the ranks were thinned in many an encounter that was never heard in the world of newspapers, and year by year the settler and nester counted fresh accessions to his ranks. While right and justice and policy were discussed elsewhere, the contest proceeded without any abatement between the parties interested. The sentence of doom that was written against the redman, while it was slow in its operation, seems utterly irrevocable. The horde of adventurers who invaded his hunting grounds and slaughtered the buffalo, were hardy, bold, and cunning as he. Within a century one of the great divisions of a common family has passed away, and its only history is a story of decadence and death, preserved in the meager annals of its first and last enemy, the frontier marksman.

So much isolation and habitual loneliness has been the cause of curious relationships, and of these the fashion of partnerships was a remarkable one. Two men, often very unlike, would associate themselves, not so much as sharers in the gains of business or adventure—though that was also included—but simply

as "pards," or adopted brethern. Each one's quarrel was also the quarrel of the other. They were always encountered together, and held all troubles in common, together with all pleasures. In most cases a genuine affection seemed to exist between them. There was rather an opinion that whoever had no "pard" was, until cause was shown, a rather "mean cuss who can't live with nobody." A separation of two partners, and a dissolution of the mysterious tie, caused as great a scandal as a divorce case in other regions.

BUT there was yet another side to the frontiersman's friendship. His neighborly obligations were all outside the obligations imposed by the sixth commandment. The six-gun was not always carried about without reason, and its owner was quick of hand and eye, and generally sure of his weapon and his aim. There was no man upon whom a reckless code of honor was so fatally and foolishly binding. An insult, fancied or real, was settled then and there with a life, and the bystanders were the judges of the fairness of the transaction. To maul and pummel was childish, and lead to no adequate result; to murder was gentlemanly and proper, and, withal, the fashion. The old code of the duello was a tame and insipid thing compared with a rucus in a saloon of a border town. There was no code, no law, no jury. Each man, in the heat of passion, was the judge of the gravity of the foolish word, the drunken insult, the hastily-spoken taunt, or the ancient grudge, and therefore gave his own life or took another for it, as depended upon his soberness, his quickness of draw, or his courage. On the border, men willingly died to be in fashion.

The man of the border had his excitements and his pleasures, ferocious and deep, and for which he refused to be called to account by society or any earthly authority. So, a painter like Frederick Remington, who could transfer to canvas some of the old-time scenes which each midnight brought to the inner room of the trader's store in a Western boom town, or a galloping band of raiding Indians on the prairie, and do it so well, preserved for all time the most striking features of early frontier life.

THE END

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Real Western, published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1, 1943.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of Real Western and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Managing Editor, Louis H. Silberkleit, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Business Manager, Maurice Coyne, 60 Hudson St., New York City.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 60 Hudson St., New York City; Louis H. Silberkleit, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Maurice Coyne, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Harold Hammond, 60 Hudson St., New York City.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is— (This information is required from daily publications only).

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1943. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1944.) [SEAL]

POWDERSMOKE ★★★★★ PAYOFF

By Cliff Campbell

"You an' Hinchley are the ones responsible for my kid bein' killed, an' my wife dyin', Foster. Hinchley's dead now; I gave him his chance to draw, too. Tonight, the rest of my debt's bein' paid!"

THE hazy dust trailed the solitary horseman like a veil while his heavy holster thumped steadily on the rider's thigh in the monotony of the little pony's even gait. Then suddenly Walt Rosser guided his buckskin mount off the main road. Down a steep trail he dipped, overlooking a wide expanse of Texas grazing country made brittle by the moon.

Several hundred yards ahead the scattered buildings of Harry Foster's mammoth 7-11 ranch stood out ghostlike and silent in the early evening moonlight. Except for one gleaming bead of yellow light that marked a window in the house, the entire spread appeared to be deserted. And such was the case, for most of the hands were riding herd up the Long Trail—Harry Foster, the cattle baron, was fulfilling a semi-annual beef contract.

Past the bunk house and corrals the pony stumbled, for the beast was tired. So was the rider. Tired in body—almost as tired as he was in spirit—for he swayed wearily in the saddle, his long arms just barely guiding bridlewise the loose hanging lines. His throat was dry, his big velour Carlsbad hat pushed far back on his sweat-beaded brow.

On the darkened porch of the ranch house, Harry Foster, tall and angular as Walt Rosser himself, came to his feet with a sharp oath, fumbling nervously at his six-shooter. The rider drew up and slipped slowly from the saddle. The other walked down to meet him.

"Howdy, Foster," the horseman said quietly, extending his hand in greeting.

The rancher ignored the outstretched hand, staring hard at the slim, dust-smeared figure before him.

"What in hell brings you here, longrider?" he asked gruffly and without ceremony.

"What do you think?" the other smiled wearily. "I've been ridin' hard for the past two days, and I'm dog-tired and famished. You and me ain't the best of friends, I'll admit, but you ain't low-down enough to refuse me a drink—and a snack of something to eat, are yuh?"

"Waal," drawled the cattle baron reluctantly, "I guess if yo're hungry, you got to eat, that's all." His lips set themselves in thin, straight lines, and a shadow played across his bronzed features. "You shore got yore nerve, Rosser. I think yo're doing a damn fool thing, coming 'round these parts when—when—"

"Oh, so you've heard about it, eh?" Walt Rosser asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Heard, did you say? How could anyone 'round here help it? Why, every saloon wall in the county has got yore face pasted on it, offering a thousand dollars' reward—dead or alive!"

Foster's nervous fingers drummed on the walnut handle of his sixgun. Hate flamed high just then, and he wanted above all else to drop this defiant and exasperating renegade on the spot, but he knew better than to attempt a draw against the lightning-like hand of Walt Rosser.

"Seem's like I was never worth so

much before, eh, Foster? Never knew a sheepman ever got so valuable," he smiled ironically. Then he added quickly, "Say, can I eat now, please?"

FOSTER led the way around to the back and into the kitchen, where, after lighting a lamp and pulling a chair up to the table, he went probing about in the big old-fashioned cupboard. Canned beans, stale biscuits, thick bacon and left-over coffee were finally rassled together, heated, and placed in front of the hungry visitor. Then the rancher sat down in a chair opposite and drew out his pipe.

"I guess you know I hate yore very guts, Rosser," the cattleman said at length, "but I can't see you starve at that. I'd—well, I'd 'a' thought you'd turn up most anywhere—'cept here." Thn he added suggestively: "Of course you knew of the reward?"

"Well, I sort of guessed it." Walt Rosser paused from his eating. "Shore, I killed old man Hinchley, 'cause he deserved it. No use denyin' that. I gave him plenty time to draw, but he was too slow. Of course you cowmen won't believe that. Wasn't another hombre in the whole world I hated like him, unless it's you, Foster."

"Oh, I'm not doubting it," the rancher countered as he exhaled a cloud of tobacco smoke. "Me and Tom Hinchley was very close friends. He was head of the Consolidated, y'know. It was the association that put up the money for the reward."

"Yeah," Rosser sneered. "The Consolidated Cattle Breeders Protective Association. Now they made you top man of that outfit, I hear." He pointed his fork accusingly at his host. "Foster, yo're the one that got 'em to put up that blood money!"

The cattleman cast a contemptuous glance across the table. "Damn—I don't see why you had to come here," he gritted, evading the accusation.

Walt Rosser ate on in silence, feeling, with the rapid disappearance of the food, the sure return of his strength. "Mebbe I'm safer here than if I stopped off at the sheriff's," he argued. "Sometimes, I'm thinkin', a man's enemy is his best friend—when there's a fat price on his head."

Harry Foster scowled ominously. He could not make out this upstart. "Where you headed for, anyway?"

"I dunno. Nowhere at the moment. But I'm worth too danged much to hang 'round here for long." He finished the beans and swallowed the remainder of the muddy coffee at a gulp. Then he wiped his lips with the back of his hand and leaned back in the chair.

"Foster," he said, slowly and evenly, "I'm headin' north, up Kansas way where I hail from and where folks is more friendly. I tried my damnedest to play the game square, but you and old man Hinchley or the association which is the same thing, just wouldn't let me. I reckon you and him did me all the dirt you could. You poisoned my waterhole and killed off all my sheep—every head. And one day I found little Bobby—my own kid—lyin' dead in the gulch—with a Winchester bullet in his back. I knew what it was all about, but I didn't say nothin' at the time 'cept make a solemn vow to myself.

"Then the fever came, and poor Anne died. She wasn't used to Texas and its ways. She was as good a wife as ever a man had—stuck to me through it all. And she had to die down here with on'y me a-holdin' her hot little hand. Lord knows how I've managed to keep up a-tall. Guess it was just thinkin' how I'd square my debt with you hombres.

"A month ago the Consolidated grabbed my land—I knew they had their eyes on that buffalo grass for some time. Old man Hinchley was at the head of that. Came right into my shack and told his bunch of gunslicks to throw me out—throw me out of my own place—just because I was alone and helpless, and you fellas wanted that extry grazin' land. Seems like you big shippers won't stop at nothin' when it comes to grass and yore own critters.

"Then I got to thinkin' about my poisoned sheep, my murdered son,

and my dead wife. Do you wonder I went loco? So when Hinchley showed up again I met him face to face—told him I was goin' to get him, and we both went for our guns. My hand was quicker, I reckon, so part of my debt is wiped out, Foster."

THE rancher made no move during this broken, dramatic speech. Only his cheeks beneath the tan, seemed to take on an ashen gray color, and his brown hands, nervous as usual, clenched themselves together on the table until the knuckles were white.

Walt Rosser leaned forward on his elbow and gazed absently out through the open door to the rectangle of moonlit garden patch beyond. The cattle baron was the first to break the silence. "You—you've been using purty hard words there, young fella. I know how you feel, but you'd better go slow with that sort of talk. You know how matters stand, and you ain't out of the county yet by a damn sight!"

"Makes no difference what you say, now," the other responded tonelessly. "I'm leavin' 'bout midnight. Just give me and Buster a couple hours to rest up, then I'll high-tail it out of here."

"That'll be the best thing you can do," Foster agreed, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Now, as much as I hate to assist a wanted man, I'm going down to the shed and see that yore nag is watered and fed. Back in a couple of minutes." And with that the rancher got up and taking from a peg on the wall his unusually high-crowned Stetson for which he was known throughout the country, he walked hurriedly out of the kitchen.

Walt Rosser smiled grimly as his host disappeared in the shadows beyond the house. Getting to his feet he strolled over to the door, squatted on the top steps and commenced to build himself a cigarette. Suddenly, from the corner of his eye he saw another form gliding silently from the bunk house. He looked up and waited for he recognized the man. It was Steve Price, a friendly cowhand and former associate of Rosser's, now working for the 7-11 outfit.

"That you, Steve?" he called, though not loud.

"Yes! But for God's sake, Walt," the man replied hoarsely, "what the devil are yuh doin' here? Why, that skunk Foster is sendin' one of the boys down to Amarillo for the sheriff right now! Beat it, quick, if yuh value yore hide!"

"Steve," Rosser said gravely, rising to his feet and gripping his friend's shoulder. "I'd be a coward to run away now. I've on'y paid back half the debt. Old Hinchley is dead, but this here sidewinder Foster is still alive. It's a debt I owe to myself, and it's goin' to be paid somehow in powdersmoke, sabe?"

And while the newcomer listened intently, hanging on every word, Rosser whispered long and earnestly. Then both men shook hands, after which Steve Price melted into the night as quickly and silently as he had come.

A few moments later Harry Foster emerged from the shadows in another direction and walked toward the kitchen. The slim figure was still sitting cross-legged in the doorway, the red tip of his cigarette standing out boldly like the bull's-eye of a target in the silver moonlight. Several times the cattleman's hand slipped to his hip, and each time he seemed to reconsider before his nervous fingers touched the butt of his sixgun.

"Still ridin' that ornery buckskin, I see," Foster remarked as soon as he was within hearing of his unwelcome guest.

"Yeah," returned Rosser with thinveiled sarcasm, "Buster's the on'y livin' thing you and the Consolidated has left me!"

The rancher pretended not to heed this pointed rejoinder. "Waal, I just saw to it that he was fed and rubbed down. Midnight, I guess'll be plenty of time to get away. By that time the pony'll be fit as a fiddle."

"Thanks," snapped the other, extinguishing the cigarette on the step

with his high boot-heel. "Reckon I'll be needin' old Buster, too, 'bout that time."

ABOUT an hour before twelve o'clock that night a dusty cowpuncher thundered up the solitary main street of Amarillo. He came to a skidding halt in front of the Welcome Stranger saloon, and throwing the reins of his mount over the hitch-rack, bolted through the batwing doors. He peered about in the smoke-laden room until his eyes finally settled on the sheriff, who, with a dozen or more cowpokes and herders, hung intently over an illuminated gaming table where from all indications a big-stake poker-game was in full swing.

The messenger unceremoniously elbowed his way through the crowd and tapped the lawman on the shoulder. When the officer looked up, a crumpled note was thrust into his hand. Slowly and critically he smoothed out the paper and carefully read the penciled lines:

Sheriff Bill Peterson—

If you want to lay your hands on Walt Rosser, come up to the 7-11 at once. He's here, but planning to leave at midnight. I'm pretending to aid him by lending him my clothes to wear—tall hat and all. He thinks the disguise will help him make a getaway. Now don't let him slip through your fingers. Remember, there's a thousand dollars in it!

Hastily,
HARRY FOSTER

The officer got to his feet quickly and raised a silencing hand. Then he read aloud the message, but long before he had finished, a noisy chorus of shouts echoed through the smoky barroom, and a dozen frantic cow waddies made a wild dash for their mounts tethered at the rail outside, and loped away in a cloud of dun-colored dust.

"Now watch yore step, boys," the sheriff cautioned when they had reached the trail leading to the 7-11 property from the main road. "Walt Rosser is as slippery as an eel, and he's magic on the draw, too, so keep yore eyes peeled and yore guns limbered. Charley"—he said to his deputy—"you stay back here with the hosses. Can't afford to make any

NO PAST FOR ★ JUDY ★

By Ruth Herbert

COMING

In the April Issue

of

GAY LOVE STORIES

noise. The rest of us'll go down on foot. Come on. . ."

There was no light now emanating from the ranch house as the posse silently crept up by the corral. The brilliant Texas moon poured a floodlight on the entire countryside and made the silos and haystacks stand out like giant specters. It was a night made for love and life and laughter. But black tragedy crouched in the shadows—this night a man was going to die!

Sheriff Peterson detached himself from the main body of the posse and managed to gain the shadow of the hoodlum wagon standing near the shed. Hunkered in the somber shade of the big truck, he waited expectantly, his blood tingling. After a few minutes had passed he impatiently drew out his watch. Holding it in the bright moonglow he could see that it was not yet twelve o'clock. But the timepiece had scarcely been returned to his pocket, when he noticed the gliding form of a tall man come out under the shed, leading a pony.

"Walt Rosser—sure as shootin'!" he declared under his breath, and he jerked out his long frontier model .44. The figure, dressed in Foster's conspicious steeple-crowned hat, with a big bandanna twisted about his neck and mouth for protection from the dust, mounted to the saddle. Close at hand Death padded softly. With his gun leveled the lawman quickly stepped out, and to the click of a cocked revolver rang out the command: "Hoist 'em Rosser! Yo're covered!"

BUT the mount, startled by the strange and unexpected voice and the sudden appearance of the sheriff from the shadows, took the bit in his teeth and shied out into the moonlight. Peterson repeated his demand.

"Stand hitched, lobo! And quick, too, or I'll. . ."

But the rider, whose hands were busy with the reins trying to subdue the frightened animal, had no time to protest or comply with the command. In an attempt to bring the skittery mount around, a quick spur was touched to its flank. The pony leaped sideways. The over-zealous sheriff believing that his quarry was trying to make a bolt for freedom, quickly tightened his finger on the trigger, and his .44 crashed. Walt Rosser, wanted, with one thousand dollars on his head was not to escape if he could prevent it!

The pony immediately reared, and as the echoes tossed the report back and forth between the ranch buildings, the rider rose slowly in his stirrups, swayed back and forth several times, then slipped face downward to the ground with a dull thud. Sheriff Peterson rushed forward, the smoking sixgun still in his hand. There was a slight tinkling of spur rowels, and the rustling of heavy leather chaps as the boys came hurrying to the scene from nearby covert.

Excitedly they crowded around the officer as he bent down and grasped the huddled figure by the shoulder, roughly turning the body over on its back. The movement caused the tall hat to fall off. Quickly, the lawman reached down and snatched away the handkerchief from the dead man's face. Then Bill Peterson let fly a crinkling oath.

"My god!" one of the posse gasped. "It's Harry Foster!"

Just at twelve o'clock midnight, two horsemen met on a dark and deserted street corner in Amarillo. One was Steve Price, who, after taking a shortcut and beating Foster's messenger to the saloon, delivered the decoy note and had remained in town as planned. The other, his big velour Carlsbad pushed far back on his head, his lithe figure sitting rather listlessly in the saddle and somewhat exhausted by his mad ride from the 7-11 spread, was Walt Rosser.

Their hands met in a firm, understanding grip. A sixth sense told them both that the debt had been paid in powdersmoke. And then, swinging their mounts around, they rode knee to knee up the dust-laden street in moody silence, on their way to the friendly State of Kansas.

THE END

(Continued From Page 77)

what he saw. "Good Josephine, you dont' mean to tell me that's gold?"

"Gold?" old Briney echoed incredulously. "Wal, I'll be—"

"Hand me that paddle, Grump!" Rainbow snapped. "I'll show you what Cheng was doing!" He shoved the paddle into the sand and began stirring it. "That's how it was worked! He was using this sharp sand to cut bar gold! The stuff he found wasn't high-grade ore; it was smelted metal!"

He told the old man to fetch a piece of canvas, as well as a shovel and broom. The keg had been partly tipped over and some of the sand had spilled out on the ground.

It was a minute before the little one could reduce his racing thoughts to order. "He busted into somebody's cache, Rip, jest as Fat Sam had the crust to tell us! You bet he was scared of this stuff! But why? He was jest an ignorant Chink cook; what gave him the idea he had to disguise his gold before it was safe to sell it?"

"I can't say yet," the tall man declared impatiently. "If Briney will get here with the canvas, we'll dump this stuff out and go over it carefully. It's plain enough that Lee Duck's gang knew just as well as Cheng that the gold would have to be reduced to dust before they could dispose of it. That's the reason for the *arrastre*. They evidently know there's a lot of it. . . Where is the man? I suppose he's got to spread the news before he gets back here!"

"Here he comes," the little one grumbled. "Looks to me as though four to five ounces of gold can be washed out of this sand." He seized the paddle and swished it around inside of the keg. "This reminds me of the time the Mexican Government called us in to run down that pair of Yaquis who was buyin' new gold coin and cuttin' it down about ten per cent and then sellin' it at face value."

"It's the same trick!" Rip agreed.

They swept up the spilled sand and then dumped it and the contents of the keg on the canvas. In spreading it out thinly Rainbow saw something that dried his throat. He seized it eagerly.

"Look at this!" he whipped out. In his hand he held a scarified chunk of solid gold two inches square. "That's what he was cutting! It's pure, bar gold!"

The tale that Briney had started winging over the ranch had been carried to the house. The partners were pouring the sand back into the keg when Glenna and Nightwind hurried up to them.

Rainbow confirmed Briney's story and showed them what he had just found.

"Jim, you've lived in and around Nevada City all your life," he said. "I know you were only a kid when the mines above the Horsethief were going full blast, but tell me, did you ever hear of anyone having a smelter up there?"

"No, I never did. The ore was alway shipped over to Salt Lake for reduction. Burling, or any of the old-timers, will confirm that."

"I'll take your word for it," Rainbow declared. "What we need now is not an assayer so much as someone who is familiar with mining operations in this part of the state over the last quarter of a century. I suppose the place to find him is at the branch of the U. S. Mint in Carson. If you'll give me a hand with this keg, Grump, we'll carry it into the house and put it where it'll be safe. We'll get back to town, then." He gave Glenna a reassuring smile. "I asked for half a break, and we got better than that this morning. I want you and Jim to see to it that the crew doesn't spread any tales till we get back."

WITH their spirits high, Rip and the little one returned to Nevada City. Approaching the bridge over the Humboldt at the edge of town, they saw a young Chinese fishing there. He had been on the bridge for several hours, waiting for them. Making sure that he was not being watched, he held up a hand for them to stop. The partners pulled up, and Rip recognized the man as the one whose face had seemed fa-

miliar that first afternoon in the quarter.

"You are Hoy Gee," he said. "We saw you in Black Rock."

The Chinese grinned. "Me Hoy Gee. Seng Mei-lang say most important she see you. Wait here long time for you."

Rainbow thanked him. Once across the bridge, he and Grumpy turned down the road under the willows and were in Chinatown a few minutes later. They found the quarter peaceful. Seng Choy's place was well boarded up. He apologized for its unsightliness, saying it was cheaper to keep the boards up than to put in new glass that might be broken again that night.

"I will tell Mei-lang you are here."

Though it was the middle of the day and Seng Choy had five of his friends in evidence, the inside door was bolted. He was gone only a moment.

"If you please, gentlemen—" he murmured, holding the door open.

"You don't need me in there," Grumpy protested, with obliging consideration. "If you do, I'll be right here."

Rip nodded. In the living room he found Mei-lang waiting. Her reassuring smile banished the anxiety in his eyes.

"I am quite all right," she told him. "It was just that I have discovered something I felt you should be acquainted with before you left. Won't you sit here, please?"

Rainbow took the hassock she offered and pulled it up beside her chair. The sunlight filtering in through the shaded window touched the ivory loveliness of her cheek. The faint, exotic perfume Rip associated with her caught at his senses.

"Does what you have to tell me concern Mullhall?" he asked.

"No," she murmured. "I don't believe the fate that overtook him interests either one of us importantly. When you spoke about Cheng Wahkee's gold last evening, you expressed some doubt about the source of it. This morning, I spoke with some of my people who have been here many years. They told me a story that you may think is fantastic. But I want you to hear it. You know that Nevada City is not old; in the Civil War days, when the Overland Trail followed the river, there was nothing here at all but the ford. Unionville was the nearest settlement of any size."

"I know about that camp and how the Chinese were driven out in the dead of winter and left to freeze to death," Rip told her.

"That has nothing to do with what I have to tell you," Mei-lang continued. "It happened several years before that tragedy occurred. It was in eighteen sixty-three; gold was being shipped across Nevada by bullion train from the rich Comstock Lode. There were no railroads in those days, of course. The wagons moved under military escort. But a train was attacked by white renegades, the handful of soldiers driven off, and over a million dollars' worth of bullion stolen."

Rainbow had straightened up and was hanging on her words.

"That gold was never recovered. The soldiers from Fort McDermitt scoured this part of Nevada. The authorities had a very definite idea of the thieves. A month later, they were found slain and scalped out on the Snake River Plateau, where they had obviously encountered a war party of Bannock Indians."

"I'm listening breathlessly," Rip confessed. "You won't know how valuable all this is to me until I tell you what I found at Rocking Chair several hours ago. . . Those outlaws buried their loot before they were killed, I take it."

"That was the general belief. For ten years men went out searching for it. A reward had been offered. There were rumors from time to time, that the cache had been found, and that instead of claiming the reward, the finders were secretly disposing of the bullion. The branch of the United States Mint, at Carson City, officially denied that such was the case.

MEI-LANG could not forego a regretful smile as she gazed at Rainbow.

"You are taking this so seriously," she murmured. "I beg you to remember that it is only an old man's tale I am giving you. Sun Goon, from whose lips I heard it this morning, is nearly ninety. He claims he was in Unionville when the robbery occurred. He came to Nevada City soon after it was founded. He says he remembers looking for the bullion, summer after summer. Whether the story is true or not, Rainbow, there is no question but what Cheng Wah-kee was familiar with it, for he had heard it many times from Sun Goon, as many others have. It is something that white men have forgotten with the passing years; it seems to be very fresh in the memory of my people."

"It is true—every bit of it!" Rip sat back, frankly stunned for a moment. This tale of the lost government bullion supplied a perfect answer to the evidence in his possession. He tried to tear it apart, to find a hole in it, but it couldn't be done; it was air-tight, with endless details meshing with machine-like perfection. He shook his head humbly. "I don't think you realize even now what you have done for me, Meilang. I told you your help would be priceless. This more than proves it. Just place what you have told me against these facts."

His account of what Grumpy and he had found on the trash pile at Rocking Chair fully explained his excitement to her. The pulse in her throat beat faster.

"This couldn't be just a coincidence, Rainbow. It all goes together like the pieces of a very intricate puzzle. Cheng Wah-kee knew what he had found. So did Lee Duck."

"But Cheng could accept the fact without any further proof," Rip pointed out. "He had found the bullion, and he had larceny enough in him to believe he could make off with it in time if he were careful. It wasn't that way with Sam Lee Duck; you can be sure he sought some expert advice that confirmed what he thought before he had Cheng murdered. If we could find the man he consulted, and get him to talk, it would provide a strong piece of cor-

(Continued On Page 90)

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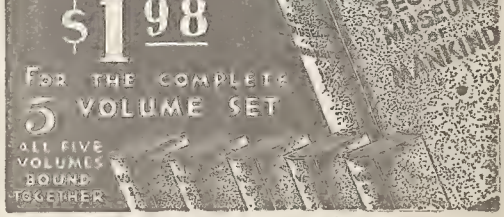

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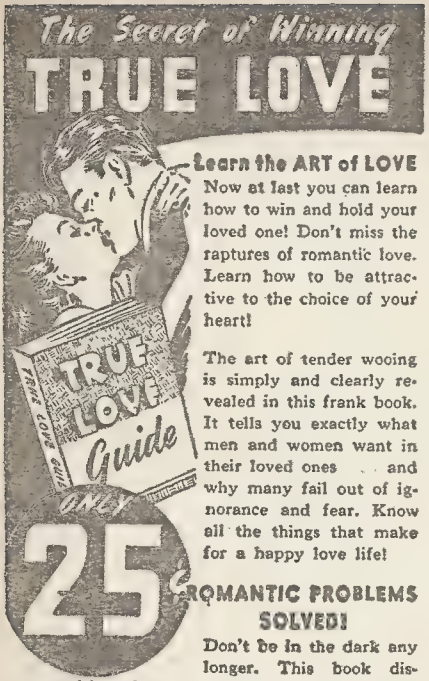

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(Continued From Page 89)

roborating evidence that a jury could not disregard."

"There is a chemist here in the quarter; Kwang Chew," Mei-lang suggested. "He deals in herbs and medicines. I understand he assays ore, too. But Lee Duck is far too shrewd to have gone to anyone in Nevada City, who was certain to connect him with what was to follow."

"He wouldn't have risked it unless he knew he could count on Kwang Chew. You can be just as sure that if Kwang was the man that was consulted he has kept his part of the bargain, or he wouldn't be alive today." Rip didn't put it into words but the thought flashed in his mind that it well might have been Kwang Chew who supplied Lee Duck and Mullhall with the poisoned salt blocks.

"We could visit the shop of Kwang," Mei-lang offered. "He speaks English, of a sort. You might ask him to examine the gold dust you are taking to Carson City. If he recognizes the sample, he will undoubtedly deny it. But we can judge for ourselves whether he is lying or not."

"Suppose we see him," Rip agreed. "It's worth the few minutes it will take. Before we leave I'd like to call my partner in and repeat your story to him. It will amaze him just as much as it did me."

That proved to be a distinct understatement. But a gleam of triumph dawned in the little one's eyes as soon as he had recovered from his surprise. "It looks like I had things sized up right when I told you this underground business was a side issue and didn't have nothin' to do with what happened to Cheng and Gordon." He turned apologetically to Mei-lang. "I don't often git a chance to crow like this," he told her. "I couldn't miss rubbin' it in to him a little. Considerable credit is due both you and me."

REMEMBERING his once open distrust of her, Mei-lang could smile. She was ready to leave in a minute. Reaching the street by way of the store, they proceeded past Lee Duck's place to the chemist's shop.

Rip caught the fat man's clerk eyeing them through the window. Glancing back as they reached Kwang Chew's door, he was not surprised to see Fat Sam hurrying in their direction.

"We'll have to talk fast," he told Mei-lang. "Lee Duck will be in here in a minute."

With the aid of a powerful glass, Kwang was examining the dust Rip had handed him, when Lee Duck opened the door. The fat man bowed to Mei-lang and the partners, his manner as unruffled as ever.

"It seems we are here on the same errand," he said, taking notice of the gold the chemist had under the glass. "I took it for granted, Mr. Ripley, that the several ounces of gold you sold me last evening were not all you had found. Looking at it closely this morning, it seemed to me that it was not a gold ore, but bar gold that had been cut—possibly with a file. I decided to ask Kwang's opinion." He smiled inscrutably. "Evidently your curiosity was aroused, too."

Rip nodded, his attention fixed on Kwang. If the man had seen similar samples before, he betrayed no sign of it.

"What do you see?" Rainbow asked. The Chinese shrugged philosophically.

"This very nice bar gold. As Lee Duck say, it has been cut."

"All right, hand it back," the tall man snapped, realizing they were wasting their time there. "Here's a dollar for your trouble!"

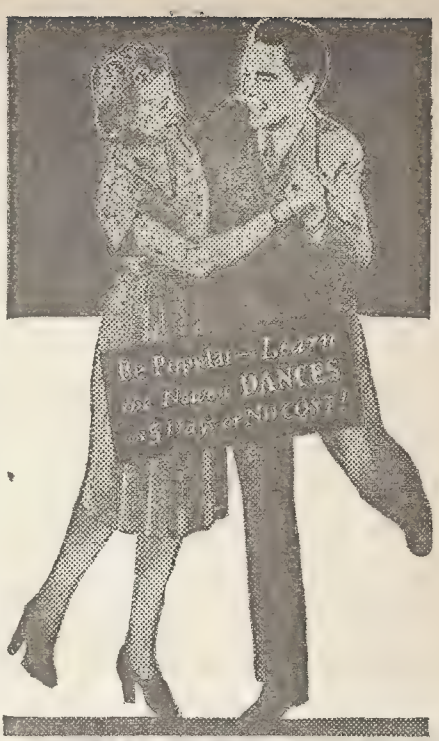
They had reached the door, when the fat man called him back.

"Mr. Ripley, you underestimate my intelligence," he said pointedly. "I sell every ounce of gold I buy to the United States Mint, at Carson City. If I had had the slightest reason to conceal anything I would have found some other means of disposing of the gold I purchased from Cheng. I assure you I am not stupid."

To learn that the gold had been sold to the mint, where it was certain to undergo a careful scrutiny, was a little too much for Rainbow.

"I don't know how stupid you are,

(Continued On Page 92)



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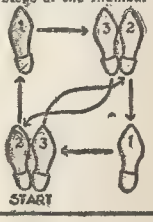

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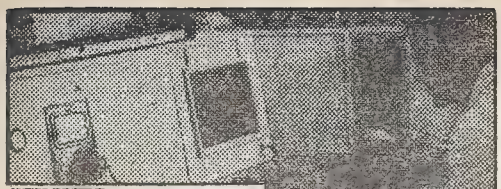

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(Continued From Page 91)

Lee Duck," he rapped, "but I propose to find out!"

CHAPTER XIV

Evidence to Convict

"I'VE BEEN here twenty-two years; some of my associates longer than that," Superintendent Holden told the partners, as they sat at his desk in Carson City the following afternoon. "The story about the lost bullion is one of our old standbys. You are mistaken in thinking it was being shipped across the plains from here. As a matter of fact, Abe Curry didn't complete this building for the government until eighteen sixty-nine, six years after that bullion train was attacked. That gold was smelted up in Virginia City in the Ophir mill and purchased by the United States from them. It's been less than ten years since one of the men who helped to pour those ingots passed away. I knew him well. He often told me they were clearly stamped: 'Property of the U. S. A.' But when you speak of turning to the old records, gentlemen, I can only tell you regretfully that if any were ever made they have long since been destroyed. There is no way in which we can scientifically identify this piece of bullion and establish its connection with the lost hoard."

"But reduction methods have improved with the years," Rip argued. "Wouldn't a careful test of gold that was smelted back in the Sixties reveal impurities, or traces of other metals, that you wouldn't find today?"

"Certainly!" Holden agreed. "I was going to suggest that we cut this piece in two, which will leave you enough for what evidence value it may have, and conduct some experiments with the rest. If we can't do anything else, we can establish the approximate time at which it was smelted."

Rainbow was relieved. "That would be good enough for me if I could prove that this stuff dated back thirty, forty years. As we told you,

I'm confidant we will. If it's all there, and it totals anything like half a million dollars' worth of bullion, and we can be sure it's of Civil War vintage, it wouldn't leave any room for doubt as to what it was."

"It would be a fabulous ending to one of the most intriguing mysteries this state has ever known," said Holden. "Suppose you give me a little time and come back about three o'clock. I'll put a good man on this."

"That'll be fine," Rip assured him. "Before we leave, there's another matter I wanted to mention. I understand you have purchased about one hundred ounces of this gold in the past six months. It was coarse dust, similar to what I have here."

Holden leaned back in his chair and laughed heartily. "I've heard the boys downstairs having some red-hot arguments over it, Ripley! When they bought it, they recognized it for bullion. But what had them puzzled was where it came from, and why it had been cut. The only thing they could agree on was that it had been stolen somewhere." He shook his head. "Wilkins will certainly be relieved! I wouldn't have connected it with what we've been talking about if you hadn't brought it up. We've bought gold over the counter from Sam Lee Duck for many years. We've come to regard him as a reliable character. Is it possible you suspect him in connection with the murder of the cook?"

"Definitely," said Rainbow. He declined to go further.

"I can understand your reticence," the superintendent remarked. "Suppose you wait a minute; I'll have Wilkins come up. I think he tested that stuff Lee Duck sold us."

HIS assistant appeared in a few moments. Holden introduced the partners.

"Henry," he asked, "do you recognize this gold?"

Wilkins smiled. "Naturally!" he said, glancing at the cuttings. "It's some more of the cut bullion we bought from Lee Duck." He picked up the cube of gold Rip had found

(Continued On Page 94)

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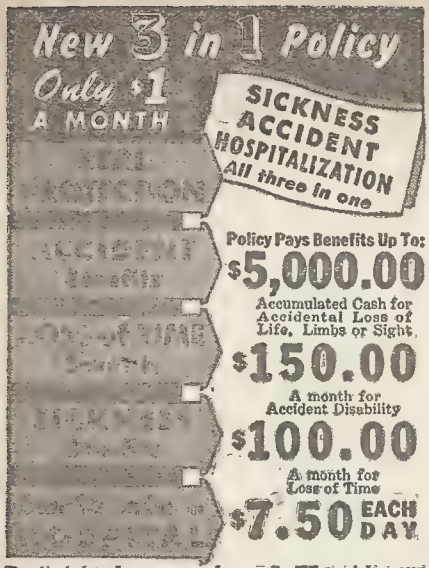
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(Continued From Page 93)

in the keg. "This is some of the bar, eh?"

"Yes. Mr. Ripley is convinced that it is a piece of bullion from the train that was robbed way back in '63."

"I can believe it," said Wilkins. "It wouldn't surprise me a bit. I know the metal is old; I made some tests and found distinct traces of antimony and manganese under the blow torch. That dates it definitely to the Sixties or Seventies." He gazed at the partners with mounting excitement. "A wagon-load of gold! In my dreams, I've found it a thousand times! Do you mean to say you've actually located the cache?"

"We believe we're close to it," Rip answered. "We're not saying much about it for the present."

"You can understand why," Grumpy added. "Does Sam Lee Duck come to Carson in person to sell you this gold?"

"Yes, he's been coming for years. It was some time early in March that he arrived with about a hundred ounces of these cuttings."

Rainbow had caught what the little one was after. "Then that was the only time he offered any of it for sale?" he queried.

Wilkins nodded. "I'm positive about that. I can give you the date by looking at the books."

"Let us go downstairs," Holden suggested. "We can finish this up now, Ripley, and you can get back up to Reno in time to catch a train east tonight. That is unless you want us to make further tests."

"No, I'm satisfied," Rip replied. "I would like to know the date when Lee Duck was here."

Investigation proved it to have been the fifth of March. Rainbow considered it as important a bit of evidence as anything they had uncovered. He thanked the superintendent and Wilkins for their courtesy, and hurried Grumpy out of the building and down to the Virginia and Truckee station. The little man had been as quick as he to catch the significance of the date of the fat man's visit.

"It makes purty plain readin', don't it?" he growled. "He's here on the

Fifth; they take the gold without question. So he hot foots it back to Nevada City, and two days later Cheng is knocked off. It's almost enough to nail him, Rip!"

"Almost. But he'll hit back hard before he's licked. I wish we were in Nevada City this minute. The best we can do now is to land there about five in the morning. The first thing I'm going to do when I get there is to see Burling. He'll have to line up with us openly. I'll ask him to deputize most of the Rocking Chair crew and go up to Horsethief with us."

"Yeh?" The little man gave him a dour glance. "What does that mean?"

"We're going after that gold, and knowing it was taken in by wagon ought to give us an idea of where to look for it."

Nevada City was not yet astir when they stepped down from the train the next morning. It was the first time they had seen the doors of the Lucky Boy Saloon closed.

"Burling won't be showin' up at his office before seven," Grumpy remarked, as he and Rip turned the corner and started up the main street.

"I don't suppose so," Rainbow agreed. "If the dining room is open, we'll have breakfast and get up the horses."

BEFORE they reached the hotel, however, Marsh Burling ran out into the street in front of his office, half a block away, and motioned for them to join him at once. With surprise tearing at them, they lengthened their stride, and as they approached the office their astonishment deepened on finding Hoy Gee and two other sober-faced Chinese waiting a few feet away. They followed Marsh inside. At his desk sat Mei-lang. Rainbow's startled glance ran from one to the other.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he demanded brusquely, his face hard and flat with unconcealed anxiety. "What are you doing here at this hour, Mei-lang?"

"Waiting for you," she replied, with a reassuring smile. "Mr. Burling thought you might be on this

(Continued On Page 96)

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early train. We didn't know where to reach you last evening." She glanced at the sheriff. "Do you want me to do the talking?"

"Go ahead, Miss Seng," Marsh urged.

"Lee Duck has left town, Rainbow. He rented a buggy at the livery last evening and was seen driving north. His place is closed. The four Chinese who worked for him took the late afternoon train west."

"And Daggett's gone, too!" Burling interjected. "He wasn't even on hand for Mullhall's funeral yesterday afternoon. These rats are running, Ripley!" Rainbow shook his head.

"I don't believe it, Marsh. I think they're going after that gold. They know it's a case of now or never."

"You must have been followed to Carson City," Mei-lang said.

"We were sure of it," Rip replied. "Lee Duck doesn't know what we learned at the Mint, but he was undoubtedly informed by telegraph that we were conferring with the officials."

"Was the superintendent able to tell you anything?" Burling asked.

"We had better luck than we expected." It did not take the tall man long to acquaint them with the results of the trip. "When Lee Duck told me he had been selling the gold to the Mint, he thought he could bluff us out of going to Carson. When that didn't work, it didn't take him long to realize that if we ever found the cache that the evidence against him would be overwhelming."

"We may be too late, Rip," the little one muttered. "They've had fifteen, sixteen hours."

"I realize that. We won't waste any more time. We'll grab a cup of coffee and be on our way. I want you to ride with us, Marsh. We'll need men. You can swear in the Rocking Chair crew." He turned to Mei-lang, only to have her anticipate what he was about to say.

"Hoy Gee and the others will see that I reach the quarter safely," she said. "I'll be anxiously waiting to hear how things go for you."

Rainbow went to the door with her.

"Be careful," she whispered, her eyes seeking his. The tall man nodded a silent answer.

With the feeling strong in them that a showdown was at hand, the three rode north fifteen minutes later. Their arrival at Rocking Chair threw the ranch into excitement. Nightwind insisted on riding with the posse.

"I want you with us," Rip told him. "Just leave a couple good men here. We won't waste any time working the lower creek; we'll strike right up Horsethief Canyon."

He spoke with Glenna briefly and did not deny the dangerous nature of their mission. She took it bravely, even when they rode out of the yard and she waved good-bye at Jim.

The Rocking Chair men took it as a lark at first, and there was the usual extravagant talk and grim joshing tossed back and forth between them that Rainbow expected from a bunch of punchers turned loose on an errand of this sort. It did not fool him; he knew the men realized that some of them might not come back alive, and that under the surface they were already keyed up and alert. By the time they were out of sight of the house, conversation had died away to only an occasional muttered word.

On reaching the road that ran up the canyon Rip pressed in close to Burling. "You hold up here five minutes, Marsh, and the little fellow and I will go ahead and scout the road. That bunch may be in here right now getting the stuff out. If they are, they'll fight it out. If they've been here and gone, we'll see some sign of it."

HE AND Grumpy pulled ahead at once. They had moved along cautiously for a mile and half or more, when a rifle cracked viciously ahead of them. The whining slug cut the little one's bridle rein an inch below his hand. With the faint puff of smoke to guide him Rip raced at the bushwhacker, stitching a ring of shots around him. Grumpy let out a wild screech and closed in, too, his .45 barking. They failed to catch a glimpse of the man. It was only a moment or two, however, be-

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(Continued From Page 97)

fore they heard a horse break away with a rush. Grumpy took after him at once and was in time to see the fleeing rider swinging around a curve in the road.

"Follow him up!" Rip yelled. "They're here! That bird was posted as a guard!"

They had not chased the man more than five hundred yards, when they whipped around a rocky point and found themselves almost on top of Speed Daggett and seven or eight others, feverishly loading a wagon. A few feet away Sam Lee Duck sat in his rented buggy, a pistol in his hand, and superintending the operation. Rip and the little one pulled their broncs into the air and spun them around. A fusillade of shots spattered around them as they fell back.

"The cache was right alongside the road!" Grumpy cried. "No wonder we didn't find it!"

"Drop back!" Rainbow yelled at him. "Burling will be here in a minute!"

The sheriff and his possemen came up quickly. In a sentence, Rip told them what they had seen. Burling was about to bark out an order, when four riders swung around the point. When they found better than a dozen men facing them, instead of just the partners, they swung back in frantic haste. Shep Rockingham's snap shot slapped into one of them.

"Come on!" big Marsh cried. "Go after 'em!"

"Wait!" Rainbow protested. "We can't get around that point without losing two or three men. It'll only take two or three minutes to reach the rim from here. We'll have them dead to rights then."

The wisdom of this maneuver was apparent to the sheriff. "All right, Ripley! Lead the way!"

They climbed out of the canyon without drawing another shot, but only to find the wagon gone and Sam Lee Duck as well. Down below, they could see Daggett and his gang posted in the rocks.

"That wagon is goin' up the canyon, hell bent for leather!" Grumpy growled. "I can hear it!"

"Forget it for a minute!" Rip snapped. "We'll go after this bunch first!"

CHAPTER XV

Trail Without End

A BELLOW of rage from below them told them that Daggett's gang had discovered the trick that had been played on them. Immediately, a rain of slugs began to spatter the rim rock. Marsh waved his men back a few feet and made his way over to Rainbow.

"If we didn't want that bunch of snakes alive, we could pick 'em off easy enough," he growled. "They can't stay there long."

"They'll run, and we'll herd them out of the canyon," the tall man answered. "Crawl up to the rim on your bellies and show them we mean business!" he called out to the crew.

Shep, Melody and the others could ask for nothing more to their liking. Their guns began to talk in earnest. It was a convincing argument, and after returning a scattering fire, Daggett and his men fled up the Horsethief.

The posse had only to stick to the rim to keep them moving.

"Rip, we'll lose them when the creek turns into mountains!" Nightwind called out. "We'll have to go down then!"

"We won't do it till we see them climbing up the slope to the Opening!" Rainbow answered. "I don't care where the chase takes us, we're rounding up that bunch!"

He put his glasses on the fleeing men when he saw them pounding up the short, steep grade to the level of the plateau. He recognized Quinn River Bill, Hanaford and several others.

"That was Hanaford you nicked, Shep," he told Rockingham. "He's in bad shape. When we get up there we ought to see something of the wagon."

They crossed the creek quickly and toiled up the slope. The quarry could be seen heading toward the ridge and Mullhall's ranch. The wag-

(Continued On Page 100)

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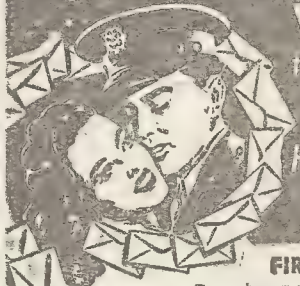

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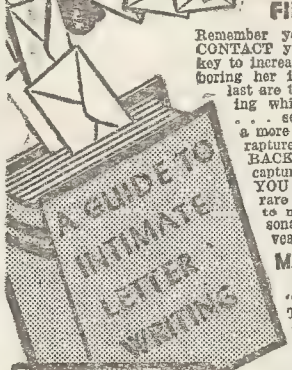

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(Continued From Page 99)

on and Lee Duck's buggy were not to be seen.

Burling ordered the men to fan out. "That bunch is making for the house," he told them. "We've got to throw a circle around 'em before they get there, or they'll fort up on us!"

"Just get us to the house ahead of them, Marsh," Rainbow countered. "It's too late for anything else. We'll lose sight of them as soon as they reach those trees."

"Follow me!" Burling snapped. "We'll cross the ridge right here the minute they're beyond seeing what we're doing!"

For all of his years, he set a pace that the others were hard put to follow. Half an hour's hard riding brought them in sight of the ranch buildings. It was the partners' first glimpse of the place. It was an ugly, down-at-the-heel outfit.

"We're here in time," Grumpy ground out. "If we put that barn between us and them, they'll ride right into our hands."

"That's what I propose to do," the sheriff informed him.

When he had his force disposed according to plan, he had only a few minutes to wait before he saw the others coming.

"What's happened to Daggett?" Grumpy exclaimed at once. "He ain't with 'em!"

"I'll wager he's heading north with Lee Duck!" the tall man ground out with bitter disappointment. "Is there any other way you could go in a rig, Jim?"

"North, or back down the canyon," Nightwind answered. "This bunch is getting close!" he warned.

Quinn River and the others rode into the yard and flung themselves from their saddles. Carrying their rifles with them, they started to run for the house. At a signal from Burling the posse broke cover. Before the cornered men could fire a shot they were surrounded.

"Throw down your guns!" Marsh barked. "The jig is up!"

Only Jensen hesitated.

"Come on!" Grumpy growled. "I owe you a little attention, and you'll git it in a second!"

BILL let his rifle drop and unbuckled his gun-belt. Rockingham and Melody gathered up the guns.

The sheriff called the partners and Nightwind aside. "What are we going to do with these fellows, Ripley?"

"We'd better keep them right here under guard for the present," Rainbow replied. "Suppose you put Jim in charge of them. You and Grump and I will go after Daggett and Lee Duck. I'm sure we'll find them somewhere between here and Newt Furey's shack."

"All right," Marsh agreed. "You turn this place inside out, Jim. You may find some Chinks here. If you can do anything for Hanaford, go ahead. We ought to be back some time this afternoon."

It was Rip's belief that the wagon load of bullion would be found without great difficulty. "They didn't have time to conceal it carefully," he said to Marsh and the little one, as they struck back toward the Opening. "The wagon was heavily loaded; it must have left a trail we can pick up."

From the crest of the ridge he swept the country to the north with the binoculars.

"I don't see anything wrong," he muttered. "We may be past the butte before we spot them."

That proved to be the case. When they first caught sight of the rig, Daggett was doing the driving, and he was keeping the team on the dead run and using the whip continually

"You know I'm beyond my jurisdiction," Marsh pointed out. "I've even put the state line behind me Fat Sam is smart enough to make the most of that."

"We'll forget the murder charge till we've got them back in Nevada," Rainbow told him. "Running aliens is a federal offense; we're taking these men into custody for the Immigration Service. Our friend Dan Ross will back us up on that and thank us in the bargain."

The two men in the buggy were not long in discovering the three riders closing in. An argument ap-

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

peared to ensue between them. Lee Duck took over the reins and drove on, but without lashing the horses with the whip. When the sheriff hailed him, he pulled the team to a halt.

"They're both armed," Rip warned. "Look out!"

Daggett betrayed signs of going to pieces. Sam Lee Duck was his phlegmatic self. Rainbow had to admire the man's cool nerve.

"I'll have to ask you to get out of that rig and put up your hands," said Burling, and taking his cue from what Rip had told him, he added, "And before you remind me that I haven't any authority up here, let me tell you I'm taking you into custody for the U. S. Immigration Service."

Only for a second did the fat man's face betray any sign of fear. "I'll be glad to get down," he said. "There is no reason why I should object to being questioned by the immigration authorities. Mr. Daggett and I were not running away from anything; we had some business at the springs with Furey."

"That'll have to wait for another day," the sheriff said curtly. "The two of you are turning back here." He ran his hands over Lee Duck and found his pistol. He took Daggett's gun, too. "Turn the team around!" he ordered.

"Marsh, you start back with them," said Rainbow. "The little fellow and I are going to see old Newt. We'll catch up with you between here and the Opening."

They parted there, and the partners went on.

"Cool about it, wa'n't he?" Grumpy muttered.

"Yeh, but he knows his finish is in sight. I think we can make old Newt talk. We're going to take him back with us whether he stands on his legal rights or not."

FUREY eyed them with his usual suspicion as they pulled up at his door. "Company, eh?" he cackled.

"Yeh," Rip answered, relieved to find that the man was not armed. "There was a couple other fellows

headed this way, but they didn't quite make it, Newt."

Grumpy and he swung down.

"Is that so?" the old man queried without any show of interest. "What happened to 'em?"

"The sheriff was herdin' them back to Nevada," the little one informed hmi." They was a couple of important gents, too—Fat Sam and that great health specialist Speed Daggett."

Furey's eyes said he didn't believe it. "What's the law got ag'in them?"

"I'll tell him," Rainbow cut in. "Things have been happening, Newt. Did you know Mullhall had been murdered?"

"Yeh," the old man answered, and then seemed to regret having spoken so quickly. Rip found it enlightening.

"If Lee Duck saw to it that someone got word to you, then you can't have any lodgers on your hands now."

Furey gave him a crafty glance. "What do yuh mean by that?"

The tall man gave it to him straight from the shoulder. Without waiting for Furey to deny his connection with the gang, he said: "We're taking you along. You've got a horse. Toss a saddle on it and lock up. It'll be a long time before you get back, if ever."

Newt tried to keep his wits together. "I ain't broke no law!" he protested indignantly. "I didn't have no hand in them killin's, nor know nuthin' about 'em till after they happened! I didn't bring no Chinks into the country. I couldn't see no harm in lettin' 'em stay here overnight and feedin' 'em a meal or two. I got a little livin' out of it, and that's all!"

"I believe you, Newt," Rip said. "But that's not the way the law is going to look at it. You knew who killed Cheng and Mr. Gordon. By not coming forward with the knowledge, you made yourself an accessory after the fact, and it'll go hard with you. As for the smuggling, you were just a cog in the wheel. But you'll get ten to twenty years for that alone. I know you're a lawless old bugger. I think you're rather harmless, though.

(Continued On Page 104)

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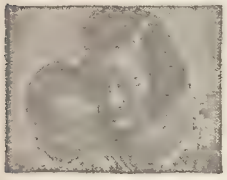

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(Continued From Page 103)

If I could help you, I would; you're an old man. I hate to see you die in some federal prison. But I can't do anything for you if you won't talk."

It was not until they were abreast of Sentinel Butte that they saw Burling moving along with Daggett and the fat man. Rainbow calculated the effect of it on old Newt. "If that pair thought they could save their skins by turning on you, they wouldn't hesitate a second," he assured him.

The old man swallowed hard and kept his dogged silence.

"He's tough," Grumpy muttered under his breath.

"He'll come through," Rainbow answered confidantly.

Jim Nightwind had important news for them when they reached Mullhall's house. In a hidden cellar, entered through a trap door in the kitchen floor, he had found five frightened Chinese.

"I've got them cooped up in the bunkhouse," he told them. "Hanaford was dying, I thought. I took it on myself to send Melody to town with him."

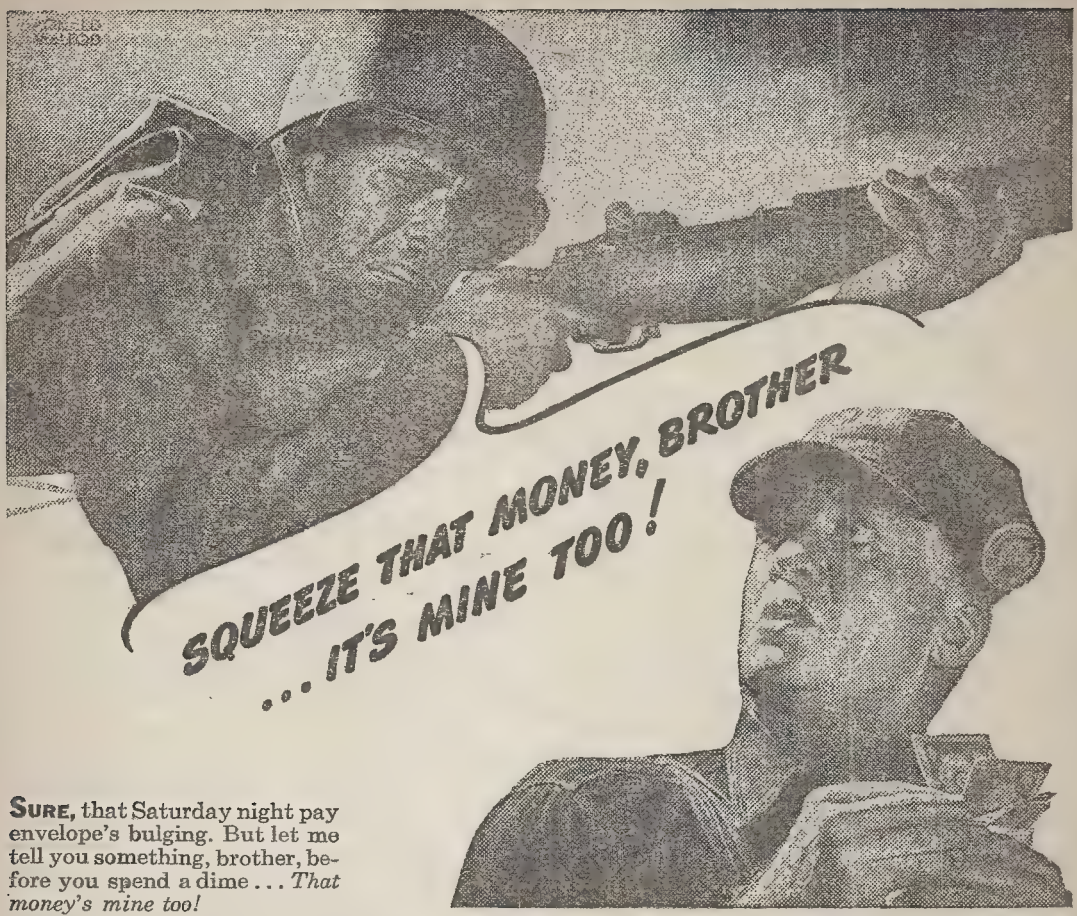
"That was all right," said Rip. "If you'll put the cuffs on that pair in the buggy, Marsh, we'll see if we can't find the wagon. We don't need a dozen men here to guard these prisoners."

Daggett had no more fight or vituperation left in him. Lee Duck still maintained his flinty silence. Even the news that the Chinese had been found in the cellar, damaging as it was, had not dented his impenetrable calm. Rainbow pretended to ignore Newt Furey, but the glance he flicked at him gave him reason to believe that the old man was almost ready to crack.

AN HOUR'S searching resulted in the discovery of the wagon and its precious load. It had been run over a cliff. It lay shattered in a ravine, the gold bars scattered about.

"I want you to take charge of this stuff," the tall man told Marsh. "I'd get it to town before dark and see it placed in one of the banks."

(Continued On Page 106)



SURE, that Saturday night pay envelope's bulging. But let me tell you something, brother, before you spend a dime . . . *That money's mine too!*

I can take it. The mess out here. And missing my wife and kid.

What I *can't* take is you making it tougher for me. Or my widow, if that's how it goes. And, brother, it *will* make it tough—if you splurge one dime tonight.

You're working . . . and *I'm fighting* . . . for the same thing. But *you* could lose it for both of us—without thinking. A guy like you could start bidding me right out of the picture tonight. And my wife and kid. There not being as much as everybody'd like to buy—and you having more green stuff than I. But remember this, brother—everything you buy helps to send prices kiting. Up. UP. AND UP. Till that fat pay envelope can't buy you a square meal.

Stop spending. For yourself. *Your* kids. And mine. That, brother, is sense. Not sacrifice.

Know what I'd do with that dough . . . if I'd the luck to have it?

I'd buy War Bonds—and, God, would *I* hang on to them! (Bonds buy guns—and give you four bucks for your three!) . . . I'd pay back that insurance loan from when Mollie had the baby . . . I'd pony up for taxes cheerfully (knowing they're the cheapest way to pay for this war) . . . I'd sock some in the savings bank, while I could . . . I'd lift a load off my mind with more life insurance.

And I wouldn't buy a shoelace till I'd looked myself square in the eye and knew I couldn't do without. (You get to knowin'— out here — what you can do without.)

I wouldn't try to profit from this war—and I wouldn't ask more for anything I had to sell.

I've got your future in my rifle hand, brother. But you've got both of ours, in the inside of that stuffed-up envelope. You and all the other guys that are lookin' at the Main Street shops tonight.

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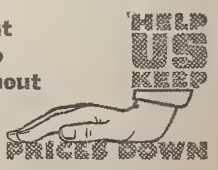

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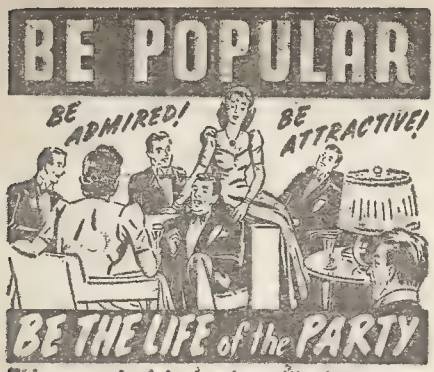

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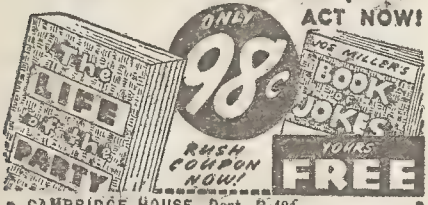

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(Continued From Page 104)

From where they stood they could see the road rising out of Horsethief Canyon. Grumpy pointed out two riders moving over it at a reckless pace.

"That's Melody in the rear!" Rockingham exclaimed.

It was the other rider who held Rainbow's attention. His mouth tightened as he recognized her.

"It's Miss Seng!" Burling declared, at his elbow. "What's she doing here?"

"We'll wait and let her speak for herself," said Rip.

"I thought you might need me here," she told them. "I had Hoy Gee posted on the bridge. When Mr. Malone drove in with the wounded man, I was quickly informed. I talked with him, and when he told me some Chinese had been found here, I knew you could question them through me."

Big Marsh shook his head admiringly. "You've got uncommon good sense and grit for a woman," he told her. "We'll see what you can get out of those fellows."

Mei-lang's questioning of the five Chinese brought the admission that they were being smuggled into the United States. It was the final straw, as far as Newt Furey was concerned. The confession that tumbled out of him was no surprise to the partners.

"Bring him into the kitchen, and I'll write down what he says and he can sign it," Burling ordered.

"Let me put a couple questions to him," Rainbow suggested, when they were seated around the table with the old man. "You say it was decided right here in this room that Cheng was to be killed; that Lee Duck agreed to have it done."

"That's right. Daggett and Hanaford showed up at my place the next day and told me Fat Sam had taken care of the cook."

"Good enough," said Rip. "Have you any proof that it was Bill Jensen who killed Gordon?"

"Proof?" Newt snorted. "Wa'n't that what all the fight was about? Mullhall had that done on his own; that's what Sam gave him hell for!

(Continued On Page 108)

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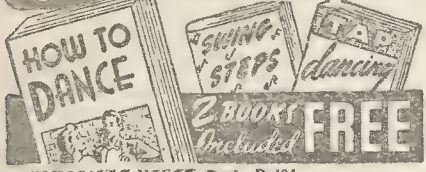

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(Continued From Page 106)

He held thar was no reason to kill Gordon. About a week later, I happened to be down here. I told Bill I was goin' to strike Buck for more money, an' if I didn't git it, I was goin 'to pull out. He told me to shut up or he'd give me some of the same medicine he handed Trig."

He signed the statement Burling made for him. Marsh glanced at his watch.

"It's late," he said. "I'll get these fellows started for town at once. I'll have to send some of your men in with them, Nightwind. A couple more will have to stay on the place till the court can appoint somebody to look after it; there's livestock here. When I've got them on the way, we'll go after the bullion. We'll have to carry it out of that ravine by hand."

There had been no denials from Lee Duck, but he had become a flabby hulk. The sheriff permitted him to make the trip back to town in his buggy; the other prisoners were shoved into a ranch wagon. Under Shep Rockingham's direction, the cavalcade drew away from the ranch.

Rainbow turned to Mei-lang. "I've arranged with Nightwind to have Melody take you to the Rocking Chair house," he said. "Miss Gordon will be glad to have you there for the night."

"Glenna will be honored," Jim told her. "We ought to be through here by dark. If you'll wait supper, we should be there in time to sit down with you."

"A woolen shirt and jodphurs is not my idea of visiting attire," Mei-lang replied, with a gracious smile. "But if Miss Gordon will take me in as I am, I shall be delighted to accept her hospitality."

They saw her on her way, while Burling was having a wagon run out from the barn. For a moment Nightwind and Rainbow were alone.

"I want to thank you personally for what you've done," Jim said soberly. "It means a great deal to me. Glenna and I have wanted to get married, but with this thing hanging over me, I didn't feel we should."

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 108)

Rainbow gave him a friendly smile. "There's nothing standing in your way now, Jim. I wish Grump and I could be on hand for the happy event."

THE sun was down by the time Burling conceded that all of the bullion had been recovered. Grumpy offered to ride into Nevada City with him. "Put a couple men on the wagon and between the four of us we'll see the stuff gits in safely," he told Marsh.

Rainbow and Nightwind rode with them as far as the Rocking Chair road. At the house, they found that supper had been held back for their coming. It was an evening the tall man was long to remember. The only shadow that lay over it was the knowledge that it was the prelude to farewell.

With womanly intuition Glenna saw to it that Rip and Mei-lang were left to themselves. A silence that was pregnant with understanding rested on them as they walked down the yard and beyond the corrals. The grass was a silver carpet under a friendly moon.

"You said you were staying only until Lee Duck and the others had been bound over to stand trial," she murmured. "How long will that be?"

"Only a day or two. You'll be returning to California?"

Mei-lang nodded. "By the end of the week." Her voice trailed away to a whisper. "It means good-bye again."

"Yes—but some part of you will go with me, Mei-lang," he said tensely. "The sound of your voice and the memory of your face. It's so much, and so little! A thousand times I've thought of the little song you used to sing. I can remember what was in your eyes." He repeated several lines of it:

"'If you stay, me love you true—
If you go, me no can do—'"

She finished it for him:

"'But me no cry, me only say—'"

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 110)

The moment was too much for Rainbow. He took her in his arms and crushed his lips on her mouth.

"This is madness, Rainbow!"

"I know it," he admitted bleakly. "A moment of madness in a lifetime of longing!"

RIP was in Nevada City early in the morning. He found Grumpy at the hotel. "I brought your stuff in from the ranch," he told the little man.

"Why, we ain't leavin' jest yet, are we?" Grumpy protested. "I figgered—"

"We're leaving this afternoon! I'm pulling out of here while I've still got the sense to go!"

The little man gazed at him understandingly. "I reckon yo're right, Rip," he muttered sympathetically. "Where we headin'?"

"Back to Wyoming. I'm going to see that you get the vacation you were hankering for in Butte."

THE END

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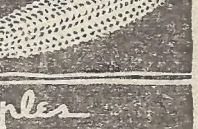

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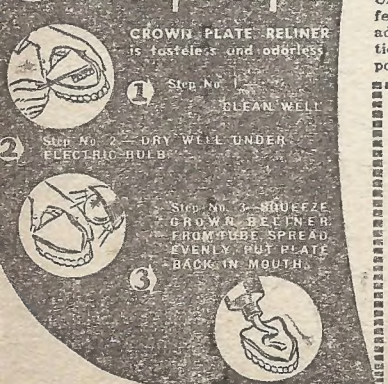
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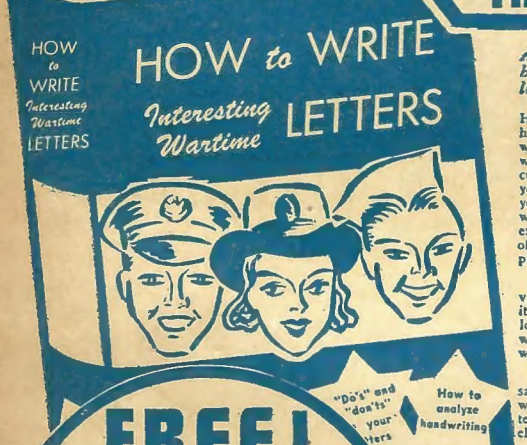
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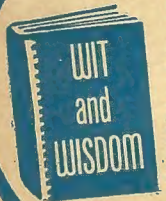

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